



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

**Thursday 18 September 2025**

**Session 6**



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**Thursday 18 September 2025**

**CONTENTS**

	<b>Col.</b>
<b>GENERAL QUESTION TIME</b> .....	1
Wildfire Management Practices (Independent Review) .....	1
Cervical Cancer Screening .....	2
M8 Woodside Viaducts .....	4
Equality Act 2010.....	5
Largs to Glasgow Central Rail Service.....	6
Ferguson Marine (Direct Award) .....	7
Community Council Convention of the Highland Council Area (Unified Statement).....	8
<b>FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME</b> .....	10
Social Security Spending.....	10
Alexander Dennis Ltd .....	12
Ferry Services (Compensation Scheme) .....	15
Food and Drink Costs (Inflation).....	16
Town and City Centres .....	17
Homelessness (Protection) .....	19
Scotland's Gaming Industry.....	21
Warmworks.....	22
Fire Service Provision (Edinburgh).....	23
Whisky Industry (Tariffs).....	23
Energy Infrastructure (Community Groups) .....	24
Care Workers (Enable Scotland).....	24
Local Housing Allowance (Rates).....	25
Whisky Industry .....	26
<b>POINT OF ORDER</b> .....	28
<b>WILDFIRES</b> .....	29
<i>Motion debated—[Emma Roddick].</i>	
Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP) .....	29
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con) .....	32
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP) .....	34
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	35
Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind) .....	37
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	38
Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green).....	39
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP).....	41
Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con) .....	43
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP) .....	44
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con) .....	45
The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie).....	47
<b>MOTION OF CONDOLENCE</b> .....	51
<i>Motion moved—[First Minister]—and agreed to.</i>	
The First Minister (John Swinney).....	51
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	54
Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab) .....	55
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green).....	57
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD) .....	58
<b>PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME</b> .....	60
<b>EDUCATION AND SKILLS</b> .....	60
Education Infrastructure Investment.....	60
Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland)	
Bill .....	62
“Preaching is not Teaching” .....	63
Higher Education Sector (Dispute).....	64
Additional Support for Learning (Rural Schools) .....	65
Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill .....	66

Nursery Mothballing (Guidance).....	68
Construction Sector (Training and Apprenticeships).....	69
<b>CARE (ISLE OF SKYE)</b> .....	72
<i>Statement—[Neil Gray].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray).....	72
<b>SPCB SUPPORTED BODIES LANDSCAPE REVIEW</b> .....	84
<i>Motion moved—[Ben Macpherson].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Sarah Boyack].</i>	
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP).....	84
Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab).....	88
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green) .....	91
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP) .....	94
The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee) .....	97
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	100
Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green) .....	103
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP).....	106
Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con) .....	108
Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP) .....	109
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab) .....	111
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP) .....	113
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind) .....	115
Lorna Slater .....	117
Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab) .....	119
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con) .....	121
Ivan McKee .....	123
Ben Macpherson.....	126
<b>DECISION TIME</b> .....	130

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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 18 September 2025

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

## General Question Time

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

### Wildfire Management Practices (Independent Review)

**1. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports that the worst wildfires ever recorded in Scotland affected the areas around Dava, Lochindorb and Carrbridge this summer, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding potentially commissioning an independent review of wildfire management practices. (S6O-04946)

**The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie):** I, alongside the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, will host a wildfire summit on 14 October. The focus will be on wildfire prevention measures, the response to recent wildfires and the appropriateness of our resources and our deployment. All key stakeholders will be invited to attend and input to the discussion. Furthermore, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is conducting a series of debriefs to help to identify lessons learned from this year's response. We will then consider whether further evidence or advice is required to ensure that we have appropriate mitigation and response plans in place.

**Fergus Ewing:** Presiding Officer, the question was not answered. Be that as it may, however, the fact is that many deaths that occur in major fires are caused not through the fire itself but through smoke inhalation when people try to flee the fire in vehicles using the road on which they arrived. Two areas in Scotland that have thousands of visitors every day for most of the year are Glenmore and Rowardennan, which both have one road in and one road out.

Does the minister agree that it is essential that, before next Easter, a detailed plan is compiled so that we are in a position to effectively tackle serious fires in such locations? Otherwise, there is a serious risk of catastrophic loss of life. Does he agree that an independent review provides the best way to compile that, rather than having a variety of public bodies marking their own jotters?

**Jim Fairlie:** Fergus Ewing has already written to me and the community safety minister, Siobhian Brown, to seek a meeting. When we have that meeting, which I have agreed to host, he will be able to raise those individual points about the areas that he is specifically concerned about. However, in relation to the independent review that he talked about, it is more appropriate to ensure that we have the experts in the room—the people who know exactly how to manage wildfires and what wildfire mitigation is—having a proper discussion about how we put resilience into our systems.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am interested to hear that the minister will attend a meeting. I wrote to him on 8 August requesting such a meeting and he told me this morning that he is too busy between now and Christmas. Well, there we go.

This year, there have been 62 fires in the Highlands. That is the highest number since five years ago, when there were 85, and we still have a big part of the year to go. In the past 10 years, there have been 570 fires in the Highlands, which represents a third of all fires in Scotland, and it is going to get worse because of things such as the muirburn code. Surely we should have centralised assets, including access to aircraft—fixed wing and rotary—in order to fight fires and save lives, rather than relying on private estates and the will of good neighbours to fight these fires.

**Jim Fairlie:** In response to the first point that Edward Mountain made, I say that he is absolutely correct. I refused to attend the meeting that he asked for on the basis that we are already planning a number of events in order to get experts in the room who know exactly what they are talking about. As far as our ability to go forward is concerned, that is what those discussions will be about, and I will be more than happy to share information about the discussions with the Parliament as we develop them.

### Cervical Cancer Screening

**2. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to ensure that people with increased genetic risk of developing cervical cancer are offered additional screening tests. (S6O-04947)

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** Scotland's screening policy follows United Kingdom National Screening Committee recommendations. The committee recommends cervical screening for eligible participants every five years. Although it has not recommended additional screening based on genetic considerations, women are offered more frequent screening if their previous result was

positive for human papillomavirus, which indicates that they may be at higher risk. Importantly, where HPV is not detected, evidence strongly suggests a very low risk of developing cancer within 10 years.

Regardless of risk factors, anyone who is experiencing cervical cancer symptoms should not wait for screening but contact their general practitioner immediately. Information on symptoms can be found on NHS Inform.

**Fulton MacGregor:** At a recent constituency surgery, I met siblings from a family following the death of their dear mother, Lavina Gilfillan, who sadly passed away from cervical cancer. They shared with me that Lavina's sister had been diagnosed with cervical cancer at the age of 21 and subsequently underwent a hysterectomy. Given that significant family history, the family believe that Lavina should have been offered enhanced screening and monitoring, but they state that that did not happen. Instead, she was diagnosed at a later, more advanced stage.

The family are now considering lodging a petition with the Scottish Parliament to call for the introduction of a cervical cancer family risk and genetic screening policy. Such a policy would aim to provide genetic counselling and testing for families with a strong history of cervical cancer; introduce enhanced screening schedules—including earlier start ages—with more frequent smear and HPV testing and access to colposcopy where appropriate; and ensure that healthcare professionals and the public are aware that a family history of cervical cancer should trigger preventative action. I agreed to raise the issue on the family's behalf. I would be grateful if the minister or the cabinet secretary agreed to meet the family.

**Jenni Minto:** I thank Fulton MacGregor for his follow-up question and send my deepest sympathies to his constituents and the wider family. I fully understand their desire to prevent others from going through what they have been through and I would be pleased to meet them to discuss their proposals. However, I reiterate that our policies must be supported by evidence, and we will always listen to the National Screening Committee and other UK scientific organisations to ensure that we make decisions that are clinically supported. I am happy to discuss that in more detail and to listen to the family.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** The minister will be aware that, following the tragic death of a constituent of mine, I have been looking into what arrangements are in place to ensure physical access for disabled people—women, in particular—in general practitioner surgeries and elsewhere, so that they can access smear tests and similar screening procedures. I have since heard from GPs that funding for access to and

modernisation of equipment came from the improvement fund, but that has now stopped. Will the minister confirm what support is available to surgeries and other medical treatment facilities to help to ensure that they are accessible to all patients?

**Jenni Minto:** I very much appreciated the conversation that I had with Pam Duncan-Glancy on that subject. As a result, when I was visiting a gynaecology area in NHS Fife, I recognised the importance of the investment that it had made in specific technology to support women who had additional requirements when being screened. I am happy to follow up Pam Duncan-Glancy's question in writing.

### M8 Woodside Viaducts

3. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Turner & Townsend regarding its role in auditing and monitoring the work undertaken by Amey to complete the M8 Woodside viaducts. (S6O-04948)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** Since May 2023, Turner & Townsend has provided Transport Scotland with commercial assurance and project control support on the M8 Woodside temporary propping project. It is in regular dialogue with the Transport Scotland team and attends frequent project programme boards, at which it provides commentary regarding project progress.

Turner & Townsend reviews and comments on tender submissions from Amey and its subcontractors, reviews cost forecasting and assists Transport Scotland with future budget setting. It inputs to project risk reviews and quantifies a suitable risk allowance to be included in the project cost range.

**Pauline McNeill:** The cabinet secretary is aware that the completion dates for the M8 Woodside viaduct repairs are currently autumn 2026 for the eastbound carriageway and late 2027 for the westbound carriageway, which is six years since the project began. Further, the budget has gone from £33 million to £152 million.

In 2021, the works were classed as an emergency, which means that there are no penalty clauses for late delivery. How will the Scottish Government ensure that the work is done efficiently and in a timely manner? Can it require Amey to take reasonable steps to accelerate the works, such as paying overtime? Given the nature of the contract—that it has no penalty clauses—what measures can be put in place by the expert group and Turner & Townsend, which is monitoring contract performance, to ensure that

Amey is held to account and that there are no further delays to the repair of the M8 viaducts?

**Fiona Hyslop:** Clearly, safety is a primary concern, but so are value for money and cost management, which I referred to. Those must be regularly scrutinised and accounted for.

On penalty clauses, I refer Pauline McNeill to the briefing that she and other members received about the challenges that have been faced in 23 locations, which have to be addressed. That includes uncharted obstruction near the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport subway. We would not necessarily expect uncharted or unrecorded obstruction, or obstruction that is recorded in a different area, to be a penalty issue.

I think that everybody understands that the project is difficult and challenging. Pauline McNeill asked whether the work can be accelerated. We will try to do that, particularly in relation to the elements that require more attention because of the intensity of the traffic.

#### Equality Act 2010

##### 4. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it has engaged with the Equality and Human Rights Commission in relation to the 19 public bodies and organisations that were found to have misrepresented the Equality Act 2010. (S6O-04949)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** The EHRC has not published the details of, or otherwise informed the Scottish Government about, the 19 organisations that it has written to following its review of evidence from the United Kingdom Government on single-sex-space policies. The review process is a matter for the EHRC in fulfilling its statutory-function role to monitor and enforce compliance with the 2010 act.

**Tess White:** The Scottish National Party Government has let public bodies break the law, betray women and burn public money. It is defending the indefensible, and that is absolutely shameful. The EHRC has reprimanded 19 organisations for misrepresenting the 2010 act, yet the SNP Government is still peddling guidance that promotes self-identification to schools and prisons. Public bodies are completely at sea because the SNP puts ideology before women's rights. Will the minister be finding out whether any of those organisations are based here in Scotland? Will she and the Government issue a directive to public bodies to follow the law by the end of the year at the latest?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** As I have made clear to the chamber on a number of occasions, the Scottish Government accepts the Supreme

Court judgment, and action is being taken. As well as accepting that judgment, we are moving forward with the detailed work that is necessary as a consequence. I have spoken in detail previously on the working group that is considering that work right across Government. We are not aware of how many of the 19 bodies are in Scotland—that is a matter for the EHRC. We have been clear to public bodies in Scotland that we expect all bodies to follow lawful practice.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 5 is from Sandesh Gulhane, who joins us remotely. *[Interruption.]*

We will move on to question 6.

#### Largs to Glasgow Central Rail Service

**6. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with ScotRail regarding an increase to the service frequency on the Largs to Glasgow Central route. (S6O-04951)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** Transport Scotland officials are in a continuing dialogue with ScotRail and Scottish Rail Holdings to ensure that the services provided by ScotRail meet passenger needs as much as possible. ScotRail has no immediate plans to increase the current service level between Largs and Glasgow Central, as it continues to meet passenger demand and matches the frequency provided prior to the Covid pandemic.

Thanks to the Scottish Government's investment, passengers travelling on the line benefit from the consistently high-performing electrified railway. In addition, commuters are now saving considerable amounts on their travel since this Government's initiative to remove peak fares for good.

**Kenneth Gibson:** When the Largs line was electrified in 1987, the double track was reduced to a single one, restricting the number of trains that were able to run in each direction. Last year, Largs station served 384,000 passengers—25 per cent more than in the previous year—and numbers are virtually back to pre-Covid levels, while national rail usage still lags behind. There is clearly an appetite for more train travel to Largs, but line infrastructure limits the current service to one train an hour. Will the cabinet secretary press Network Rail and other partners to invest in the branch line to deliver a half-hourly service that better reflects growing demand?

**Fiona Hyslop:** As I said in my initial answer, the current service level for passengers in Largs is consistent with pre-Covid levels—it meets existing demand. The member clearly makes the case for added infrastructure investment, and, obviously, he knows what we have to prioritise. A

considerable amount of infrastructure investment is already taking place in our railways, within the current budgets. There are no immediate plans to double track the line, which is what would be required to deliver what the member is asking for, but he has made the case and brought the matter to my attention, so I will ensure that my officials discuss it with Network Rail.

**The Presiding Officer:** As we have been unable to make contact with Dr Gulhane, we will continue to question 7.

#### **Ferguson Marine (Direct Award)**

**7. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will make a direct award to the Ferguson Marine shipyard for the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles. (S6O-04952)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** Ministers consider all new vessel projects, including the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles, on a case-by-case basis to determine an appropriate and lawful route to market.

Shipbuilding is a competitive global market. Any direct award of a public contract must comply with applicable procurement and subsidy control rules, and be capable of withstanding legal challenge. The direct award of public contracts is possible only in strictly limited circumstances, and those matters take time to consider. We are considering the business case and the next steps in relation to the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles, and we will confirm those in due course.

**Katy Clark:** Given that such lifeline ferries are critical infrastructure, will the Scottish Government consider a direct award under section 45 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022? I am sure that the United Kingdom Government would be willing to work with the Scottish Government on that, given that it has already made representations in relation to procurement law.

Alternatively, if the Scottish Government is going to put the contract out to tender, will it look at what is happening in other parts of the UK, where the UK Government is placing a minimum 10 per cent social value weighting element into the assessment of bids for shipbuilding contracts? That is not happening in Scotland, so will the Scottish Government look to include such an element in any tendering process?

**Fiona Hyslop:** We have social value weighting in our current procurement legislation. I can confirm that we are actively looking at the options of direct award and competitive procurement to determine an appropriate and lawful route for procurement.

It is important that we reference what the islanders think. For a bit of balance, I will quote John Daniel Peteranna from the South Uist business impact group, who said in local media:

“We have every sympathy for the skilled workforce at Port Glasgow, and for the need to sustain shipbuilding on the Clyde. But sympathy cannot come at the cost of island lives, livelihoods, and long-term sustainability. To use our ferry needs as a tool for political point-scoring would send out a deeply damaging message to our communities.”

The tone and context in which Katy Clark asked the question has allowed all members to consider this very important issue and reflect on all the needs of the workforce and the islanders.

**The Presiding Officer:** I regret that, for connectivity reasons, I am unable to contact and call Sandesh Gulhane. I therefore call Douglas Ross to ask question 8.

#### **Community Council Convention of the Highland Council Area (Unified Statement)**

**8. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the unified statement agreed at the community council convention of the Highland Council area regarding the impact of major energy infrastructure in the region, in Beauly on 14 June 2025, what the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy’s response is to the statement and whether she will attend a future convention meeting to discuss it. (S6O-04953)

**The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie):** I point out that I am answering on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy.

We are clear that the potential impact of major infrastructure necessitates pre-application consultation and engagement with local communities. The Scottish Government has published good practice guidance on the procedures for applications under sections 36 and 37 of the Electricity Act 1989, which includes information on public consultations. Although the power to mandate community benefits sits with the United Kingdom Government, we continue to press for mandatory provision from mature onshore technologies and a level playing field across the UK to ensure that the energy transition delivers real benefits. Maintaining the standards of the ministerial code for live applications means that Government ministers cannot attend public meetings of that nature.

**Douglas Ross:** I am sorry, but that is not true and it is not an answer to a very clear question. Can the minister take that back to the cabinet secretary? It does not breach the ministerial code if the cabinet secretary meets and listens to concerns in the Highland Council area, and that is

all that we are asking for. Can the minister pass that on to the cabinet secretary?

**Jim Fairlie:** I should point out to the member that, as a former UK Government minister, he will know that, when we are looking at specific applications, there are clear guidelines in the ministerial code. However, I will take his point back to the cabinet secretary and she will respond in due course.

## First Minister's Question Time

12:01

### Social Security Spending

**1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** The Auditor General today confirms that the Scottish National Party has a £1.2 billion black hole in social security spending for this year alone. The SNP's benefits black hole is going to get even bigger, reaching £2 billion by 2030. The Auditor General says:

"The Scottish Government has not yet set out a detailed strategy for how it will manage the forecast gap between social security funding and spending within its overall budget."

The Government will spend £2 billion a year more on benefits than budgets provide, yet it has no plan to pay for it. Will John Swinney tell us what his plan is, or whether he even has one?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** As Mr Findlay knows, the Scottish Government is obliged to balance its budget annually. We have done so on every single occasion since we were elected to serve the people of Scotland in 2007. The issue that Mr Findlay raises essentially comes down to whether we are prepared to follow the benefit policies of the United Kingdom Government, which include making cuts to support for people with disabilities, who are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. My Government will do no such thing.

**Russell Findlay:** Of course, social security is an essential safety net for every citizen, but it has to be fair and affordable. The SNP has created an agency that takes claimants at face value when it reviews benefit claims. Claimants have only to tick a box on a form that says, "My needs are the same," and that is it.

The Auditor General also says that there is no system to investigate the fraud that is not only inevitable but happening right now. He highlights that

"there is no timescale for when Social Security Scotland can consider incorrect payments due to client error or fraud."

Can John Swinney tell us when those vital checks will be introduced?

**The First Minister:** One of the facts that Mr Findlay omitted in putting his question was that the Scottish Government, through the establishment of Social Security Scotland, has presided over the safe and effective transfer of personal independence payments to adult disability payments for 350,000 disabled people in Scotland. I take this opportunity to thank the staff of Social

Security Scotland for doing such an excellent job in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

If errors are made in the system, or if there is evidence of fraud, those issues are already addressed by the systems that Social Security Scotland has in place. Those mechanisms are there to ensure that the public purse is protected and that support reaches those who need it.

One of the undertones of Mr Findlay's question, which he never gets round to answering, is: whose benefits does he want to take away? We hear all his rhetoric, but when it comes down to the hard, specific realities of whose benefits are getting withdrawn, Mr Findlay has no answers.

**Russell Findlay:** It sounds to me as if John Swinney is saying that the Auditor General is wrong. He is not. It is black and white: there are no systems in place to prevent fraud.

The Auditor General also reveals today that 20 per cent of personal independence payment benefits are reduced or ended following standard review elsewhere in the UK but that, for Scotland's equivalent benefit, that figure is just 3 per cent. Again, that means that, in the words of the Auditor General,

"Social Security Scotland does not have a reliable figure for the amount that is lost to fraud and error."

The SNP's approach is not only naive and negligent; it is a betrayal of those in genuine need and of taxpayers. Can John Swinney tell us how much benefit fraud is taking place, or does he really have absolutely no idea?

**The First Minister:** Mr Findlay omitted to say in his question that the data about the United Kingdom system shows that a substantial proportion of the cases that he mentions are overturned on appeal. Therefore, the point that he advances is not a valid one to put to me.

As I have indicated to Mr Findlay, the Scottish Government has put in place a system that is designed to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. I think that that is the right purpose for our social security system, which the Government is proud to have in place in Scotland and which is delivering support to almost 350,000 of our most vulnerable citizens.

**Russell Findlay:** Every week, John Swinney omits to give a straight answer to basic questions.

There are no checks on fraud or error. There is not even a timeline for when checks might be introduced. Scotland's soaring benefits bill is unsustainable, but John Swinney has no plan to pay for it. We are talking about a £2 billion black hole, made by the SNP.

At committee this morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, Angela Constance, was asked five times how that bill would be paid, and the best answer that she could come up with was that the money would come from "the people of Scotland." That will send a shudder down the spine of every taxpayer in the country. By exactly how much will the SNP raise taxes to pay for its £2 billion benefit black hole?

**The First Minister:** As Mr Findlay knows, all the issues around tax are dealt with in the budget process, and there will be an opportunity for the Conservatives to engage in that process to discuss those issues. I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will engage in those discussions constructively, but the Conservatives have to be able to come to them with some proposals. *[Interruption.]*

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** Stop the fraud.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Let us hear one another.

**The First Minister:** It is not good enough to come here and talk about the soaring benefits bill and then not say whose benefits are going to be taken away.

**Members:** The fraudsters.

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear one another.

**The First Minister:** I am certain that the Conservatives will want to do exactly what their London equivalents did: pursue and harass vulnerable people in our society. This Government will not go down that road.

#### Alexander Dennis Ltd

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I welcome this week's news about the furlough scheme at the Alexander Dennis bus manufacturing sites in Falkirk and Larbert. That will provide welcome respite for the workforce, and Governments continue to work to secure a future for ADL at those sites. However, what guarantees has the Scottish Government secured that, if contracts come, Alexander Dennis will keep those sites open and maintain the jobs that are currently in Scotland? The Government has now reopened phase 2 of the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund with public money, but what guarantees can the First Minister give that that will lead to Scotland's buses being built in Scotland?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I am pleased that Mr Sarwar welcomes the progress that the Scottish Government has made in collaboration with Alexander Dennis and its workforce. I take the opportunity to thank the company and its workforce for engaging substantively with the Deputy First Minister on all

these issues to get to a position in which the Scottish Government has been able to support the company to retain hundreds of manufacturing jobs in Scotland, which is very welcome.

The Government has engaged with the company, and we have put in place the offer of a furlough scheme. The furlough scheme can be activated only if the company demonstrates success in securing orders. There is growing confidence that satisfactory orders will be secured.

In relation to ScotZEB 2, there is a procurement process that must be pursued, and the Government will report to the Parliament on the conclusions of that exercise.

**Anas Sarwar:** The workforce will want to hear commitments on contracts in Scotland, as well as guarantees from the company in response to the very welcome furlough scheme.

Industrial strategy must be more than simply crisis management. Whether in relation to buses or ferries, we need a joined-up approach. On Monday, the GMB union led calls for the Ferguson Marine yard to receive a direct award for the next ferry for Scotland's fleet. We welcome that call. John Swinney has spoken of his support for the yard, but, when pressed on a direct award, his Government will say only that it is complicated. Guaranteeing a supply of work for that yard is essential to the workers there, but it is also essential to protect taxpayers' investment and to secure those jobs for generations to come. In the spirit of collaboration, what legal advice has John Swinney sought on a direct award of contracts to Ferguson Marine? Will he share any existing legal advice with the Parliament?

**The First Minister:** I think that Mr Sarwar was in the chamber to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Transport give a detailed response to Katy Clark's question on exactly that: a potential direct award to Ferguson Marine for the contract for the successor to the MV Lord of the Isles. I said on Monday that it is complicated but that the Government is doing the detailed work to enable that to be considered. I give Mr Sarwar the absolute assurance that the Government is strongly engaged in exploring that as a possibility. The transport secretary gave comprehensive details of the work that is under way.

Mr Sarwar will understand that I cannot disclose the legal advice that is available to the Government on this question, because we need to consider all those elements. However, I give him the fundamental assurance that the Government is actively considering such a proposition, along with other propositions, as the transport secretary has set out.

Our work on the contract and continued support for Ferguson Marine is part of a comprehensive

industrial strategy for Scotland, which is essential. We are now getting into territory in which more progress is being made on manufacturing opportunities in Scotland. I welcome that, and the Government is committed to making that happen. Our agencies, whether that is Scottish Enterprise, Transport Scotland or any other bodies, are actively engaged in that work.

**Anas Sarwar:** We need a more coherent industrial strategy, whereby we build our vital infrastructure here in Scotland. That means building buses in Scotland so that Scottish companies can thrive, and it means building ferries in Scotland so that Scottish shipyards can thrive. However, under the Scottish National Party, we have had buses for Scotland built in China while Scotland's bus companies struggle, and ferries built in Turkey and Poland while Scotland's shipyards go without.

I am clear that a Scottish Labour Government that I lead will build Scotland's buses, ferries and other crucial infrastructure right here in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* Will John Swinney make that same commitment and stop sending—

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear one another.

**Anas Sarwar:** SNP members do not want to hear it, Presiding Officer.

Will John Swinney make that same commitment to stop sending public contracts to Poland, China and Turkey and give those jobs to Scotland?

**The First Minister:** I am sorry to break some sombre news to Mr Sarwar, but, when the Labour Party was the leading party in the Scottish Executive, it sent contracts for ferries to Poland and to other European countries. Mr Sarwar will have to check up on his history—

**Anas Sarwar:** I was at school.

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear one another.

**The First Minister:** He will have to check up on the history of the performance of the Labour Government. If people want to know what a Labour Government might be like, they need only look at the shambles that was in here before us and the shambles that is in place in the United Kingdom at present.

I am all for buses being built in Scotland. I am all for ferries being built in Scotland—

**Anas Sarwar:** When?

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr Sarwar.

**The First Minister:** I am all for developing the skills to make sure that we can do that, and I am all for ensuring that we invest to make that

happen. That is what I was doing this week—making sure that that is likely to happen—and I am proud of that record for the people of Scotland.

### Ferry Services (Compensation Scheme)

**3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** The Scottish Government's ferry fiasco is a national embarrassment. It has cost us a fortune, but no Scottish National Party minister has ever had the decency to resign. Scottish Liberal Democrats have been arguing for years that islanders and coastal communities deserve compensation for the colossal disruption to their lives. Now, the Scottish Government has belatedly set up a scheme, but far too many are excluded from it. Why do businesses on Mull, Iona, Coll, Tiree, Islay and Jura all get absolutely nothing?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** First, I accept that there has been disruption to ferry services in Scotland. We are working hard to replace the fleet. As Mr Cole-Hamilton will know, one of the large vessels is now in service, another is being finished at the Ferguson Marine yard, and four further vessels are coming from the Cemre yard in Turkey. That will give us six new vessels for the fleet in the current period—those contracts are taking their course—which will strengthen the ferry network.

The Government has put in place a compensation scheme that examines the degree of disruption in different island communities and considers where that disruption has been acute and where the delivery of payments is merited. In the islands that Mr Cole-Hamilton has cited, the level of disruption has not been comparable with the level in areas with more significant disruption. That is the judgment that has been applied by ministers in putting in place a compensation scheme, and we discuss and consider such schemes with the relevant island communities.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** The First Minister should tell that to the communities that have seen their timetables altered to hide the cancellations. That is “unfair, arbitrary and divisive”. That is what Joe Reade from Island Bakery on Mull says about the scheme, and that is what everyone in excluded communities thinks.

The Scottish Liberal Democrat consultation on the future of ferries closes tomorrow. We are listening to everyone who is affected. The Scottish Government clearly is not, because there is no compensation for Mull, where the toy shops of Tobermory are genuinely displaying signs that say that their toy ferries are more reliable than their real-life counterparts.

There is no compensation for Cumbrae or Ardrossan, which has lost its link to Arran because the SNP Government built a boat that does not fit

its harbour. There is no compensation for the islands and port towns of the west Highlands or in Argyll and Bute, where timetables were stripped back to hide cancellations.

Sympathy does not pay the bills. When will the First Minister enrol those communities in the scheme? When will they get the cash?

**The First Minister:** I will take the example that Mr Cole-Hamilton puts to me about the ferry service to Arran. The Government has put in place a two-vessel service between Troon and Brodick. I accept the disruption to Ardrossan. That is why Mr Gibson has been given the solemn commitment of the Government on the acquisition of Ardrossan harbour, so that we can take it into public ownership and ensure that it gets the enhancements that it requires.

I have demonstrated that there has been a two-vessel service between the mainland and Arran on a constant basis. There are, of course, other ferry links from the mainland to Arran, at Lochranza. A variety of other opportunities are available. Where the service has, unfortunately, not been satisfactory, we have provided compensation. That has come about by examining and exploring the disruption that has taken place and providing the support that our islanders deserve.

### Food and Drink Costs (Inflation)

**4. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the potential impact on households in Scotland of the forecasts from the Food and Drink Federation that food and drink inflation could reach 5.7 per cent by December. (S6F-04313)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I agree with Mr MacDonald and with the comments from the Food and Drink Federation, whose forecast is concerning, particularly for low-income households in Scotland that are already grappling with cost of living pressures and are disproportionately affected rising food prices.

I will quote the chief economist of KPMG, who summarised the situation as follows:

“Since April, the rise in inflation has been driven largely by domestic policy choices, including the increase in employer national insurance contributions.”

The Scottish Government is taking steps to try to support households. Our most recent intervention has been the abolition of peak rail fares, and we have other interventions, such as the Scottish child payment. What does not help us is to have significant negative economic impacts coming from policy choices such as the United Kingdom Government's decision to increase

employer national insurance contributions, which is damaging the economy.

**Gordon MacDonald:** According to the Food and Drink Federation, the inflation increase is down to Labour policies such as the rise in national insurance contributions and skyrocketing energy prices, which means that families and businesses in Scotland are once again paying the price for Westminster policies. Will the First Minister outline what the Scottish Government is doing to provide support to families in Edinburgh Pentlands, and across Scotland, who are struggling with the ever-increasing cost of living?

**The First Minister:** The Government is taking steps, through our budget provisions, to allocate more than £3 billion to policies that tackle poverty and the cost of living. Those measures include the Scottish child payment, free prescriptions, supported bus travel for 2.3 million people and support for early learning and childcare of more than £6,000 per eligible individual.

The Government is taking steps, using our own resources, to support families facing difficulties, and we will constantly look to establish how best that can be undertaken, but we have to do that against the backdrop of decisions taken by the United Kingdom Government that create ever more challenges for families and for the Scottish Government in addressing those circumstances for families in our country.

### Town and City Centres

**5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government will support town and city centres as retail destinations. (S6F-04296)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** Economic growth is at the very heart of the Government's agenda and we are working closely with businesses to drive economic growth in our towns and cities and to support both consumers and local businesses.

That support includes funding the Scotland loves local campaign, more than £3 million in funding to address retail crime and the most generous business rates relief in the United Kingdom. Our competitive non-domestic rates regime in 2025-26 includes a freeze on the basic property rate, delivering the lowest such rate in the United Kingdom for the seventh year running and maintaining the lowest property tax rate in the UK for more than 95 per cent of non-domestic properties in Scotland. Those are some of the measures that we are taking to support towns and city centres.

**Murdo Fraser:** All members will be aware of the decline of town and city centres as traditional retail destinations. This week, the Scottish Retail

Consortium published a five-point plan to make retail investment more attractive, including changes in planning, a focus on retail crime and, crucially, a "more competitive" business rate than in England.

Despite what the First Minister has just said, in the past three years, the Scottish Government has not passed on to businesses here the far more generous rates relief that is available south of the border. Will the Government now rethink its position and give retailers here the support that they need?

**The First Minister:** I welcome the Scottish Retail Consortium's contribution to the debate and we will further consider its proposals. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government met with the Scottish Retail Consortium this week and we will give every consideration to its ideas.

The Government has taken a number of steps to support town centres. As I indicated in my earlier answer to Mr Fraser, we maintain the lowest property tax rate in the UK for more than 95 per cent of non-domestic properties. The Government has a long track record of ensuring that businesses in our town centres are supported by a competitive business tax regime and we will look to reflect that in the policy and budget proposals that the Government brings forward.

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** It is well understood that hospitality businesses bring people to town and city centres, which benefits all, including retail, as happens in the superb Shore area in my constituency, and on Leith Walk and elsewhere.

However, I know that too many of our hospitality businesses are struggling at the moment, largely because of the increases in employer national insurance contributions that were made earlier this year, as well as other factors. Does the First Minister agree with the view, which I and UKHospitality share, that the United Kingdom Chancellor of the Exchequer must consider a VAT cut for hospitality in the UK Government's upcoming budget?

**The First Minister:** Such a measure would certainly help the hospitality sector and would go some way towards dealing with the negative consequences of the increase in employer national insurance contributions. It is beyond my conception as to why it is a good idea for a United Kingdom Government that is supposedly interested in growth to apply an increase in employer national insurance contributions. Such increases stifle growth, and we are seeing the effects of that in many communities around the country.

Mr Macpherson set out the arguments that the UK Government will need to consider in the

budget. We will, of course, make representations to the UK Government on that question. In addition to the steps that we are taking in Scotland to support many businesses in our town and retail centres, we will continue to consider any changes in regulation and in the planning system that we could apply that would make it easier for businesses to trade and to create the type of economic opportunities that we want to be available in our town and retail communities.

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I welcome the UK Labour Government's commitment to provide millions of pounds for Kirkcaldy town centre. That investment has the potential to kick-start the town centre regeneration of the lang toun. How will the First Minister work with the UK Government and the community to maximise the benefits?

**The First Minister:** I welcome the investment that the UK Government has made in Kirkcaldy town centre. I welcome any such contribution, but we must see the whole picture. Kirkcaldy town centre's difficulties will have been exacerbated by the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which has made it more expensive to employ people in our economy. I am all for giving a warm welcome to the benevolence of the UK Government, but I will also point out its shortcomings, and there are plenty of those.

### Homelessness (Protection)

**6. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to protect renters in the private sector from homelessness. (S6F-04300)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** Scotland leads the United Kingdom in supporting private tenants, and that work is backed by some of the strongest homelessness legislation in the country.

In addition, we have recently announced an ambitious plan, backed by the provision of £4.9 billion, to accelerate action on tackling the housing emergency. The Housing (Scotland) Bill, which is now at stage 3, will further strengthen support by introducing new prevention duties, enhanced protections for domestic abuse victims and new tenants' rights, including the introduction of rent controls. This year, we are also providing more than £99 million to local authorities for discretionary housing payments to mitigate Westminster's cruel bedroom tax.

However, there are limits on how much the Scottish Government can do. One of the most significant levers of support is local housing allowance, and this Government has repeatedly called on the UK Government to commit to uprating housing support for tenants. I hope that

that will be delivered in the upcoming budget on 26 November.

**Maggie Chapman:** A renter moving into their new home today will have no clear sense of how long they can stay before they could be kicked out by their landlord. They may have as little as four weeks', and a maximum of three months', notice. Sarah and James and their two children were evicted from their home in Inverness and were unable to find a suitable home in the three-month notice period. A family of four was forced into a cramped one-bedroom flat that was so much smaller than what they needed.

Renters in England will soon be protected from eviction on the most common grounds for the first 12 months of their tenancy and will also get a longer notice period, but that right does not currently exist in Scotland. We can fix that when we consider the Housing (Scotland) Bill next week. Will the First Minister commit to supporting Green amendments that would ensure that Scotland does not fall behind and would improve protections from eviction for renters in Scotland?

**The First Minister:** I appreciate the significance of Maggie Chapman's points. I want to make sure that families can rely on good-quality accommodation, which is why the Government is investing so significantly in housing. We are making progress on acquisitions and voids work, through which we are bringing more and more properties back into use. That is a consequence of the increased Government investment. Significant protections are already in place in existing legislation and, as Maggie Chapman indicated, consideration will be given to the Housing (Scotland) Bill as it goes through its final stages in the relatively near future. The Government will look at all policy proposals, but I encourage Maggie Chapman to consider the significant steps that have already been taken to provide greater protection for renters in Scotland and that provide substantial protection for individuals and tenants in Scotland.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** The truth is that the Scottish National Party has had 18 years to get a grip of Scotland's worsening housing shortage. Figures that were released this week show that the number of families in temporary accommodation has increased by 6 per cent, 10,000 children remain trapped in temporary accommodation, and rough sleeping is on the rise—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear Ms Gallacher.

**Meghan Gallacher:** They do not want to hear it, Presiding Officer, but the figures speak for themselves. Can the First Minister tell the Parliament when the housing emergency will end?

Is he confident that his Government can achieve the target of 15,000 affordable homes, especially when we are debating a housing bill next week that will not result in one single home being built?

**The First Minister:** What builds homes is the combination of private investment—and the Government has made changes to the Housing (Scotland) Bill to enable that to be sustainable—and public expenditure. The public expenditure for housing in the Government's budget in 2025-26 is £808 million, which is £251 million more than it was last year. Meghan Gallacher was one of the Conservative members who, like the Labour Party, did not vote for that provision. This is another example of members of Parliament not being prepared to vote for the provisions that will solve the problems that they are raising with me at First Minister's questions. That is not a way to solve the housing crisis—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear the First Minister.

**The First Minister:** The way to solve the housing crisis in Scotland is to build on the strong record of this Government, which has built—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Members. We have many members wishing to ask questions. Let us hear one another.

**The First Minister:** Let me explain my point: between 1999 and 2007, an average of 5,448 affordable homes were built each year under the Labour and Liberal Democrat Government. Under this Government, it is an average of 7,734 each year. The SNP Government has built more houses on average per year than our predecessors. That is because we are prepared to take the action to deliver on the housing emergency when everyone in the Labour and Conservative parties just postures.

**The Presiding Officer:** We move to general and constituency supplementaries.

### Scotland's Gaming Industry

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** Scotland's gaming industry continues to go from strength to strength. This week, Scotland hosted the prestigious DICE Europe summit for the first time, which saw industry global leaders come to Edinburgh for key talks. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the sector's contribution to Scotland's economy, and what steps is the First Minister taking to ensure that skills and support are in place to ensure that Scotland continues to be a hub for the games industry?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I very much welcome Clare Adamson's points. It was my

pleasure to host, along with the minister responsible for innovation, Richard Lochhead, representatives of the games industry at Bute house on Monday evening as part of the prestigious DICE Europe summit, which had come to Scotland for the first time. It is an industry that matters, and we brought its senior leaders to Bute house to consider how we can continue to build on the growth that has already been delivered. We now have an industry in Scotland that has increased in turnover by nearly 800 per cent since 2010—that is a huge vote of confidence in the industry.

The Government is investing in our skills system to ensure that our universities are able to produce the graduates who will support the industry, and we provide targeted enterprise support for our start-up ecosystem. We have a range of other programmes to support our creative industries, which again, this week, delivered formidable achievements in taking steps to engage young people and members of the public. I very much welcome the participation of the DICE summit in Scotland and I look forward to supporting the industry as part of the Government's focus on growth.

### Warmworks

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Since last November, I have been assisting a couple and their baby daughter to obtain support from Warmworks to replace their broken heating system with a zero-carbon alternative. That process began more than a year ago, and in that time they have had no permanent heating or hot water in their home, where both the young child and their mother have chronic health conditions.

Warmworks has offered conflicting advice; it has lost reports; and, despite a helpful intervention from the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Màiri McAllan, when she instructed Warmworks to re-engage with my office, it has failed to respond to both my constituents and me in the timescales directed by the cabinet secretary.

Will the First Minister and his cabinet secretary please look into my constituents' situation as a matter of urgency, before they spend another winter without heating or hot water?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I ask Mr Whittle to furnish me with the details of the case; it will obviously be familiar to the Government if the cabinet secretary has already intervened.

I have to say that I am not very happy with what Mr Whittle has recounted, because if a cabinet secretary directs an organisation to engage with a member of Parliament, I would expect that engagement to be substantial, regardless of the politics in the chamber. I have dealt with

Warmworks on a constituency basis on a number of occasions, and have pursued cases where things had not worked out perfectly, so if Mr Whittle would give me the details of that case, I will pursue it on his behalf.

### **Fire Service Provision (Edinburgh)**

**Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** What urgent action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure adequate fire service provision in Edinburgh, in the light of the reported proposal to close Marionville fire station, despite the area's expanding population and the increased activity at Leith docks?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** There is a consultation process under way, led by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which is looking fundamentally at the basis for delivering a safe and sustainable fire service that is appropriate for our needs at this particular time.

I know that there is widespread concern about Marionville fire station; I have seen representations about that, and I encourage all interested parties to engage with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I give Mr Choudhury an assurance that the SFRS will undertake the consultation on the basis of assessing the needs to enable sustainable and safe delivery of a service, and that must include a service for his constituents in the city of Edinburgh.

### **Whisky Industry (Tariffs)**

**Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** I welcome the First Minister's unwavering commitment to protecting and enhancing our Scotch whisky industry—a vital, thriving sector that creates thousands of jobs across Scotland.

Can the First Minister provide further details on his recent meeting with President Trump in Washington ahead of the United Kingdom and US trade talks? At that meeting, he made the case to reduce the tariffs on the Scotch whisky industry—something which the US industry supports.

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** As colleagues will be aware, I travelled to Washington DC last week to support the efforts of the Scotch Whisky Association and its counterparts in the United States in the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States and the Kentucky Distillers Association, which have a shared and symbiotic relationship in relation to the sustainability of the industry.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to spend about 50 minutes with President Trump explaining that argument, and I engaged substantially with the President on the issue.

I make it clear to Parliament that I was making representations on behalf of the industry—I was not negotiating a trade deal; that is the proper responsibility of the United Kingdom Government. However, I also had the opportunity last night, at the state event that was hosted by His Majesty the King at Windsor castle, to discuss the issue further with President Trump. I will continue to engage in order to ensure that I deliver the type of zero-for-zero arrangement that the United States whiskey industry and the Scotch whisky industry are seeking, because I think that that makes economic sense on both sides of the Atlantic.

### **Energy Infrastructure (Community Groups)**

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** In the coming days, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks will submit its planning applications to have megapylons span from the Highlands right through the north-east to the central belt. Community groups in rural areas feel ignored. Gillian Martin is happy to jet off to Japan next week to sell off Scotland's countryside to foreign wind developers, but she still refuses to meet those community groups. Will the First Minister do something that his energy minister is too feart to do and meet those groups who are seeing their countryside trashed by energy infrastructure?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** As a matter of fact, the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy is in Japan this week. She is at the Osaka expo, at which she is promoting the tremendous strengths of Scotland in renewable energy. That is exactly the type of work that ministers should be doing to promote the interests of Scotland to an international audience. I welcome all that the energy secretary is doing.

Mr Lumsden invites me to consider issues that will become the subject of live planning consideration by ministers. He knows the rules as well as I do: I cannot engage on issues of this nature that will be determined by ministers. The proper process will be followed.

### **Care Workers (Enable Scotland)**

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Care workers, 80 per cent of whom are women and many of whom are among our lowest-paid workers, make independent living possible. Indeed, I would not be in this chamber without them. However, Enable Scotland staff in Glasgow have been forced to strike because of recurring empty promises to deliver sectoral bargaining and fair pay. That has left carers across the sector rightly angry and third sector organisations really struggling. I stand in solidarity with those staff and

their trade union, Unison, which has said that—I will quote care workers in Glasgow—despite promises,

“the Scottish government have delivered year-on-year disappointments.”

When will the First Minister and his Government stop disappointing? Will he acknowledge that care has been undervalued by the Government, and will he get round the table with care workers as soon as possible on sectoral bargaining and pay parity, starting with pay of at least £15 per hour?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I totally acknowledge the points that Pam Duncan-Glancy makes about the importance of care workers and supporting independent living. I express my admiration for those workers in general, and especially for the fine individuals who support Ms Duncan-Glancy, who are always a joy to see in the Parliament.

This is a pay dispute between Unison and Enable, so I have to leave it to the trade union and employers to resolve it. For its part, the Government is investing around £900 million in social care pay support. I value the work that care workers undertake; the state relies entirely on those care workers to provide that support. We continue to look at what more we can do in that respect. It will be a material part of the budget process and, as I said in one of my earlier answers, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will engage with all parties on those priorities in the run-up to the setting of the Government’s budget for the next financial year.

### Local Housing Allowance (Rates)

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** The United Kingdom Government’s harmful decision to continue the Tory freeze on local housing allowance rates will impact thousands of low-income renters in Scotland, widening the gap between housing support for private renters and private sector rents.

Will the First Minister join me in calling on the Labour UK Government to permanently repeg LHA rates to at least the 30th percentile of local rents? The Resolution Foundation states that that vital move would

“lift 75,000 children out of poverty”

by the end of the current UK parliamentary session.

**The Presiding Officer:** I remind all members that questions should be put referencing the First Minister’s responsibilities in a clear manner.

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The Scottish Government recognises the issue. In one of my earlier answers, I made reference to the

local housing allowance; that uplift would assist us to tackle the issues of homelessness that we are wrestling with and to support families who are living with poverty.

In this financial year, the Government is making £7.9 million available to mitigate shortfalls in local housing allowance rates and help to protect tenancies. We are making a further £2 million available to support households in temporary accommodation to find settled homes.

There would be much greater assistance if a link were to be established with the local housing allowance. I encourage the UK Labour Government to do exactly that.

### Whisky Industry

**Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** Further to Evelyn Tweed’s question about the whisky industry, I congratulate the First Minister on his attendance at the state banquet for President Trump and the first lady of the United States at Windsor castle yesterday.

The whole chamber will rejoice at the warm personal emerging relationship that is developing between the First Minister and the President. It fair gladdens all of our hearts. In fact, I feel the hearts of the Scottish Greens melting, even as I speak. *[Laughter.]*

What was not immediately clear from the answer that the First Minister gave to Evelyn Tweed, and what I think members wish to know, is what impression he got from President Trump of the representations that he made on behalf of the Scottish whisky industry. Does the First Minister hope or have any expectation that those representations might lead to good news for our industry in the near future?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** One thing that I will always be able to say about Jackson Carlaw is that he knows how to bring hilarity into the parliamentary chamber. *[Interruption.]* Oh, and Jackie Baillie thinks that I can manage it, too. I am glad that I am conveying such bonhomie. It is not always how Jackie Baillie describes my contribution to Parliament but, if bonhomie is the order of the day, I shall settle for that.

On Mr Carlaw’s question, the fact that President Trump was prepared to engage in discussions about that issue in the Oval office should be welcomed, because it indicates a willingness to consider the propositions that I am putting forward. Fundamentally, all that I can ask for is to get a fair hearing about issues that are affecting the industry in Scotland. I was able to marshal, for President Trump, some of the difficulties that are being created for the industry in Scotland as a consequence of tariffs. Some such difficulties are also prevalent in the United States, because the

tariffs are leading to a loss of employment in Kentucky, due to the reduction in production activity in the Scotch whisky industry. I hope that, with regard to what I have characterised as a win-win situation, President Trump will be persuaded by my arguments, but time will tell on that matter.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes First Minister's question time.

## Point of Order

12:47

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You know what I am going to mention, because I emailed you this morning seeking to raise the matter after First Minister's question time.

First Minister, as I left the chamber yesterday, I was physically assaulted and verbally abused by your Minister for Parliamentary Business, Jamie Hepburn.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Please speak through the chair, Mr Ross.

**Douglas Ross:** This is the point that I wish to make to the First Minister: I wonder whether he will make a statement and take the opportunity to say that he has a zero-tolerance approach to threatening and intimidating behaviour by his ministers. I raised the matter yesterday afternoon with parliamentary officials. I notice that the Minister for Parliamentary Business is not in the chamber this afternoon. Therefore, will he be making a statement on the incident later today?

**The Presiding Officer:** Comments addressed to the First Minister in the chamber are not a point of order. However, this is a very serious allegation, and it is important that it is dealt with through the appropriate processes. I expect all members to take their responsibilities under the code of conduct seriously. If anyone considers that the conduct of a member has not met the terms of the code, a complaint can be made.

Complaints in relation to most matters covered by the code, including a complaint of this nature, would be initially investigated by the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. Recommendations in relation to any complaints may come to the chamber in due course, so I must avoid any comment that might compromise that. However, complaints about the conduct of a member arising in their ministerial duties are dealt with under the Scottish ministerial code and are a matter for the First Minister. Thank you.

We will allow a few moments for those in the chamber and in the gallery to clear before the next item of business.

## Wildfires

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Business is resuming, so I ask members who are leaving the chamber and those who are leaving the public gallery to do so as quickly and quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18710, in the name of Emma Roddick, on the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes with grave concern the reported increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires in Scotland, including in the Highlands and Islands, and the devastating impact these events have on the environment, economy and communities; recognises what it sees as the unique vulnerability of the Highlands and Islands due to its expansive rural landscape, peatlands and the changing climate; highlights what it sees as the significant risks posed to biodiversity, air quality and critical infrastructure; recognises what it sees as the immense pressure that is placed on emergency services, local resources and the resilience efforts that are required from everyone, from government to third sector volunteers; notes the reported role of climate change, land management practices and human activity in contributing to these events, and further notes the calls on the Scottish Government to review its wildfire prevention and response strategies, and for cross-party collaboration to develop a robust, long-term plan to mitigate the threat of wildfires, discourage irresponsible behaviours and build resilience in communities.

12:50

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** First, I recognise that, as I speak, there is a crowd of people outside the Parliament from the climate mass lobby. I know that a number of my constituents have made the journey from the Highlands and Islands in order to have their voices heard. While I am in the chamber, leading what I know is a very important debate, I recognise what they are doing as well, and I apologise that I cannot be with them today.

The increasing intensity and frequency of wildfires is expected given climate change and the related extreme weather events that we are seeing. I am clear that effort is needed to tackle climate change if we want this world to remain habitable for our species and to mitigate the impacts of wildfires, flooding and other events on our infrastructure, communities and natural environment.

The less we do to limit our impact on climate change, the more it is going to cost us in lives and livelihoods, and financially. These are expensive events to tackle and recover from. The overall efforts to decarbonise transport, housing and energy are not separate from what I am about to

speak to, and neither is restoring biodiversity. However, in the rest of my speech, I will focus on the reality that, regardless of what I hope will become an escalation in efforts worldwide to address our impact on the climate, we need to get better at preventing and reacting to wildfires.

I have had many constituents write to me about wildfires. Some have personally been heavily impacted by them and others are simply devastated by what they have witnessed, particularly at Dava moor this summer. The fires destroyed woodland and killed thousands of animals, and reportedly people could smell them from as far away from the site as Orkney.

A common theme in what folk have been calling for is action against the irresponsible tourism and camping that are so often linked to these events. Even when the exact cause is not known, as at Dava, the remains of glass bottles, burned tinfoil and campsites that are spotted among the devastation infuriate locals, especially victims of the blaze.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority is leading the way, with Scotland's first fire management byelaw—to restrict open fires and barbecues—currently waiting for sign-off from ministers. I am glad that such steps are being taken to protect our national park, but I and many others in the Highlands would like that action to be replicated across the region. The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity has heard from me on numerous occasions about the potential for a Scotland-wide ban on disposable barbecues, particularly over the summer months, and I hope that, when he sums up, he will lay out any limitations on the Government doing that and say what his suggested way forward is. It is not enough to say that the issue is complex and leave it alone. We need to take action here. If we are unsure about devolved competence, we must test it and not just abdicate responsibility.

The temporary fun of a disposable barbecue is not worth the danger to life, whether human or animal—wild or livestock—the risk to the environment, or the potential damage to rural businesses and homes. As the chief executive officer of the CNPA, Grant Moir, told me, the recreational fires that were agreed as being appropriate 25 years ago are no longer so. The risk of wildfires has increased, their intensity when they catch is greater and the incidence of uncontrolled fires, thanks to folk taking risks, is simply too high.

The CNPA is doing a lot that could be replicated elsewhere and it is leading the way. We do not need to reinvent any wheels. Under its climate adaptation fund, it has so far provided grants of more than £600,000, including for fire management equipment and training for estates

and contractors. With Scottish Land & Estates, it is working to replace equipment that was damaged in the Dava fires. That building of resilience and use of existing expertise and roles that are based on the ground where the wildfires take place will undoubtedly support faster and more effective reactions when fires are spotted.

Another issue is raised with me frequently. Who should have easy access to a helicopter? Among the various suggestions that have been made, one is that NatureScot is not quick enough to react because landowner insurance can cause issues. Given the risks in allowing fires to spread, looking at how the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service can more quickly and reliably get access to helicopter support in tackling blazes seems overdue. Scottish Land & Estates has suggested that the fire service should have its own helicopter capabilities. A constituent of mine suggested that responsibility should sit with NatureScot and another told me that it really does not matter, and that whoever can react should be given the resources to do so.

Management of fuel load comes up frequently, too, and I hope that the minister will respond to demands from gamekeepers to ensure that muirburn licences are attainable to help with wildfire prevention. Mutual aid provided by land managers in a crisis is invaluable. Those people know about the land, access to it and the risk factors involved. As the Government responds to cross-party calls for more action on wildfires, it will need to include those voices in plans and policies.

I am not one to call for action plans, strategies or other Government stratagems, but the lack of a Scottish wildfire plan seems to be a screaming gap, given the massive co-ordination between authorities that is needed to manage not only risk but active incidents. The kit that is available to fire services to tackle wildfires must be considered in the context of their work with other people on the ground, and all parties should be part of the necessary discussions on what further SFRS equipment could be helpful and complementary to local efforts.

I have already shared with Government the suggestion of one constituent that we need more data and strong evidence about land use and the vegetation that was on the ground at the time that a wildfire caught and spread. Knowing more about that reality—rather than different sectors pointing fingers at one another—would be invaluable.

Even my generous seven minutes is not long enough to cover all the points that have been raised by stakeholders reacting to today's debate, but I look forward to hearing everyone else's contributions.

The debate has attracted one of the largest volumes of correspondence that I have had about

a members' business debate. My excellent motion-drafting skills might have played a part in that, but I suspect that the bigger reason is the genuine and deep-rooted willingness of people on the ground—gamekeepers, non-governmental organisations, the public and lobby groups—to play their part in wildfire prevention and tackling incidents.

The Scottish Government has access to the wealth of knowledge, experience and volunteer willingness that exists out there, which it can grab hold of to tackle the increasing intensity and frequency of wildfires. I hope that it sincerely and enthusiastically makes use of that, and that the cross-party consensus that I hope we are about to hear results in real, concentrated action.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I advise members that there is an awful lot of interest in the debate. I am keen to ensure that everybody who has requested to speak has an opportunity to do so for the four minutes that they are entitled to. Members will need to stick to four minutes, even with the motion without notice to extend the debate that I confidently predict will be necessary.

12:58

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** It is refreshing to have a debate on a burning issue that truly matters to communities across Scotland rather than the recent focus on foreign policy and constitutional wrangling.

Puns aside, this is a very serious issue. The increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires in Scotland, including in my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries, is deeply alarming. Wildfires are no longer rare events; they are a growing threat to people, property and our natural environment. I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The issue demands urgent action from the SNP Government—it should not be another issue that is kicked into the long grass.

Traditionally, the peak fire season in Dumfries and Galloway runs from early March for around 12 weeks, yet this year we saw 10 fire alerts between 13 January and 15 September. That is an unusually high figure compared with previous years, going back to 2012. The response to a freedom of information request revealed that Scotland has suffered 1,574 wildfires during the past decade. Alarmingly, the figures show that there were more wildfires during this year than in any other full year except 2017 and 2018. The figures, which are drawn from Scottish Fire and Rescue Service data, coincide with periods of historically high temperatures, as confirmed by weather forecasters' records.

During the same period, Scotland has increased its tree cover, reduced grazing by sheep and deer and seen fewer hectares of upland under active management through prescribed burning. Those changes, which some believe are well intentioned, have undeniably contributed to the problem. The threat is not only to human life but to wildlife in our countryside, where the loss of tree cover has been dramatic.

**The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Finlay Carson:** I am sorry, but I do not have time.

In early April, a major wildfire in Galloway forced the evacuation of people and properties. Emergency services, supported by helicopters, battled a blaze that stretched several miles wide at its peak. Amid the crisis, the response from volunteers and local organisations was nothing short of extraordinary. Galloway Mountain Rescue Team worked tirelessly around the clock, evacuating campers from danger zones, often in the dead of night. Using advanced thermal imaging tools such as drones, it provided critical intelligence to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and even co-ordinated rescue 199 from Prestwick in airlifting people to safety. The team's efforts undoubtedly saved lives and prevented tragedy.

We must also commend the Glentool Hive community volunteers, who provided food, shelter and welfare support to exhausted responders during the height of the emergency. Their support and resilience were a lifeline for those on the front lines. Local farmers and land-based businesses also stepped up to supply water bowsers, all-terrain vehicles and manpower to help to contain the fire. That collaboration between emergency services, rural businesses and volunteers demonstrates the very best of community spirit in the face of adversity.

Although public behaviour is a factor, the Scottish National Party Government cannot ignore its responsibility for ensuring that our communities are better prepared. That means listening to those with first-hand experience—the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—rather than ignoring their warnings. Earlier this year, I called on the First Minister to listen and take action. Instead, he ignored my calls and blamed those who did not support his budget. That response was far from acceptable. Regrettably, the First Minister seems determined to press ahead with savage cuts that will close fire stations in many rural areas, cost jobs, inevitably increase response times and put lives at risk. The Fire Brigades Union has been clear that there must be no further cuts.

If the SNP Government is serious about protecting the public from wildfires and other emergencies, it must act now. That means proper funding of our fire service, listening to the expert advice and supporting voluntary and rural sectors.

**The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown):** Will the member give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** No.

**Finlay Carson:** I once again put on record my heartfelt thanks to Galloway Mountain Rescue Team, the Glentool Hive volunteers and the many local farmers and businesses who gave of their time to protect lives and livestock. I—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Carson. I call Emma Harper, who has up to four minutes.

13:02

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I thank Emma Roddick for securing the debate. Her region was hit hard with the biggest wildfire this summer around Dava, which caused massive devastation in an area of great beauty and natural resource. Sadly, parts of my South Scotland region were also hit hard. April saw one of the biggest wildfires in living memory in Galloway, when 17,000 acres of moor and forest were destroyed around Glentool in a fire lasting several days, the after-effects of which are still being seen in the community and will be seen for many years to come. That is nearly the entire surface area of Loch Lomond ablaze and alight, and now almost bereft of life.

Thankfully, as with other wildfires in Scotland, there were no fatalities or serious injuries, at least among human beings, but I am also concerned about the wildlife. It may only be a matter of time before someone is seriously injured or killed in a wildfire. At Glentool, hikers were evacuated from hills by emergency services and campers were told to relocate to a place of safety. I fear that, at some point in the future, we will be reading reports of the death of someone who could not be reached in time and suffered a terrible fate. We must do all that we can to prevent that from becoming a reality.

We saw just how hard our emergency and response services worked. I again place on record my thanks to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the police and Galloway Mountain Rescue Team for their supreme dedication, work and bravery in helping to tackle the Glentool fire. I also thank local people at the Glentool Hive, who Finlay Carson mentioned. They worked incredibly hard, in a stressful, difficult and threatening situation, to support emergency responders. They

threw open the doors of the Hive in the middle of the night and ensured that those tackling the fire could refuel and get some rest and necessary internet access.

Some years ago, there were issues with sky lanterns being launched and landing miles away, risking wildfire and damage to property and livestock. Thankfully, the use of those things seems to have died down but, in many ways, it is more disheartening that the wildfires that are now taking place are almost certainly caused in situ, and that those who are responsible, even if by accident, can see for themselves the landscape and environment that their actions might destroy.

I am proud that we have some of the best open access legislation in the world. In contrast to the hugely restrictive regime across the border, for example, we have a framework that allows people to enjoy our land freely and without unnecessary restrictions. However, we also have to face the fact that a small minority of people exercising those rights are doing so irresponsibly and putting locals, their livelihoods and their environment at huge risk.

We cannot say for certain what caused the Galloway wildfires. Finding a needle in a haystack is impossibly tricky when that haystack is 17,000 acres, but our Fire and Rescue Service is clear that most wildfires are started by human activity. That means that we must educate anyone who is accessing our world-class countryside about the devastation that irresponsible use of those access rights can have on our communities.

Climate change is here, and we have to adjust our way of living and working to that reality. As Ms Roddick mentioned, there is a climate change mass rally at Dynamic Earth right now, which I hoped to be at.

One action to take must be to give the prevention of wildfires a higher priority across public policy. I hope that Emma Roddick's debate and the contributions from members around the chamber will play a part in informing the Government's thinking on how to, as far as possible, prevent these disasters from happening again.

13:06

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):**

For years, the Fire Brigades Union has been raising the alarm. The Scottish Government has been warned that there must be proper plans in place to deal with wildfires and the necessary resources to support them. The increase in wildfires is due to climate change and changes in heather moor management, and we need urgent climate action if we are to properly protect life and property from wildfires.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service needs significant investment. That means more firefighters better equipped and trained, along with better planning, research and co-ordination. The head of the service, instead of fighting for proper investment for the service, has presided over, and in some cases, recommended, unprecedented cuts to front-line resources. Understaffing has been so bad throughout the last period of wildfires that nearly all fire and rescue services in the most severely affected areas had to call up off-duty firefighters and ask them to work extra shifts. Fire engines sat in stations because there were not enough people to crew them in such circumstances. Fire Brigades Union members have worked to exhaustion.

I have lodged a series of parliamentary questions seeking information on the current state of the service in the Highlands and Islands. I was alarmed to learn that, of the 125 on-call fire stations, there are only 10 with a full team—that is less than 10 per cent. In more rural areas of my constituency, that is exacerbated by many volunteers not working locally during the day, reducing the cover even further.

I had confirmed that the SFRS has lost more than 1,200 firefighters since the SNP came to power in 2007. It is currently operating with a 29 per cent vacancy rate, so it is no wonder that the service is under so much pressure. Firefighters are asked to place themselves at risk without the necessary kit, and they are expected to work on hillsides with the same gear that they use to enter burning buildings. The physical stress puts this workforce at extreme risk.

Since the creation of the SFRS on 1 April 2013, the service has suffered tens of millions of pounds' worth of real-term cuts. The plain facts are that, since 2012-13, the year before it was created, to 2023-24, there has been a reduction of more than 1,250 firefighters in Scotland—the total workforce has reduced by more than a sixth in that time. Of the 1,250 jobs lost, 729 were whole-time firefighters and a further 368 were retained operational firefighters. Those are direct cuts to front-line services.

The £332.1 million resource budget for the SFRS in 2025-26 equates to a £56 million real-terms cut in the 12-year period since the service was formed. Sustained underinvestment is creating problems, with an £800 million capital backlog. We must be grateful to the gamekeepers and others who have come to the aid of the service, but we should not have to depend on the general public to prop it up.

13:10

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind):** On 28 June, several wildfires raged, covering an area that included Dava, Lochindorb and Carrbridge, which are all in my constituency. That was the largest wildfire that has been recorded in Scotland's history and it covered an area of around 40 square miles, which is half the size of the city of Edinburgh. A wildfire that occurred in Caithness in the flow country a couple of years ago was estimated to have produced 700,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide. That was half the area of the fire on 28 June, so it can safely be assumed that its carbon emissions were well over 1 million tonnes. To put that into perspective, the reduction in carbon that was achieved in Scotland for 2022-23 was 0.9 million tonnes in total. The fire created more of a problem for the environment than all our efforts to reduce carbon for a whole year in Scotland.

I do not know why the Scottish Government has not said that, nor do I know why residents in Dava, some of whom I have spoken to, had no information or advice whatsoever about whether they should evacuate their homes as fires approached them from both sides. The lady who I spoke to does not want her name to be identified or to speak out. She had an elderly neighbour of 82 years old; they received no help—their families had to help them—and no advice, even though they asked for it. People were nice, but they could not say anything. No one from the headquarters down the road in Grantown-on-Spey went to see them. The day after the fire began, I asked ministers whether they would hold a Scottish Government resilience room meeting. They should have, but they did not—why not?

**Jim Fairlie:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Fergus Ewing:** I am sorry, but I have only four minutes. I am happy to discuss it at a meeting. As the minister knows, I normally take interventions.

There are a huge number of things that we have to do, but a plethora of public bodies are involved, including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, CNPA, NatureScot and Forestry and Land Scotland—which, apparently, does not allow its employees to tackle fires on their own property, which is absurd. As so many public bodies are involved, I think that an independent review is required; otherwise, I am afraid to say, bodies will just mark their own homework. Although lots of them do good things, as some members have said, collectively, they have no plan.

I raised the issue during general question time today, but in some areas, such as Glenmore from Aviemore to Cairngorm, or Drymen to Rowardennan from Ben Lomond, there is only one

road in and one road out. I have lived in both areas, so I know that they get 3,000 visitors a day. If there is a fire, people will go back to where they came from and will die in their cars from smoke inhalation. People do not die because of fires; they die because of panic and smoke inhalation.

There is no plan at all. I have not got time to go through them all, but there are lots of things that we require, such as aerial cover, more training, and plans that should be implemented by individual estates. Essentially, there is no public rural wildfire service in Scotland—it is run by landowners. Goodness me, the fire service contributes, but it works limited hours: I believe that its employees do not work in the evening, or on moorland. It is up to the keepers, who are under attack from legislation that is so pernicious that it is trying to get rid of field sports altogether. Without keepers and controlled muirburn, we ain't seen nothing yet for wildfires in Scotland. I hope that the Scottish Government will get a close grip on the issue, which is the most immediate threat to rural Scotland.

13:14

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am involved in a family farming partnership in Moray.

I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this debate to the chamber. If it has done nothing else, it has held the minister's feet to the fire with regard to a response to a request that I made on 8 August for him to meet my constituents, Mr Ewing's constituents and other constituents in the region to discuss the issue. I found out today that he was unable to attend because he had accepted a subsequent request that was made by another MSP. That is not good enough, and I will make a complaint through the correct channels.

I have some experience of wildfires, having fought plenty of them in my time. They happen in remote areas, and it is really difficult to fight them. In many cases, specialist vehicles are required to get to them. That is what the fire brigade needs, and keepers and estates often supply such vehicles. I also reiterate the point that Mr Ewing has made, which is that wildfires are often best fought at night, when the wind is low and there is a heavy dew. However, that is the time when some parts of the fire service are unable to attend, which means that it is certainly the time when keepers go out and fight those fires. I remember one in Tongue that we fought for five days, successfully putting it out at 4 o'clock in the morning, having fought it every day and night during that period, taking only two hours off to rest.

Neighbours can provide specialist knowledge in such situations. I want to make the example personal by drawing attention to one contractor, Stephen Shand, who did not work on the estate but dropped everything to move his equipment up to where the fire was and start fighting it. He had no indication that he was going to get paid for it; he did not worry about that. He was trying to fight the fire because it was on a neighbour's land. We rely on such effort, and it is really important. The Parliament should acknowledge the effort that people make.

Fuel load is a critical issue. It is difficult to manage the fuel load in areas with wind farms—which we are getting more and more of across Scotland—and there is a particular difficulty in managing fuel load in relation to the peatland grant schemes. This Parliament, which believes that it knows better than the people on the ground, has dictated how muirburn and the management of moorland should be carried out. I am afraid that, after nearly 30 years of experience of doing that, I find some of the decisions that the Parliament has made to be completely bizarre.

I am short of time, but we need to consider what we do with regard to woodland grant schemes. When I was driving across the Dava moor the other day, by Lochindorb, I noticed all the trees that had been burned. They were all part of a woodland grant scheme and will all have to be replaced. Who will bear the cost of that? Why should it be the landowner? They did not start the fire, and there was nothing that they could do. No one will be able to attribute the cost or the blame to any individual, so it needs to be dealt with through insurance. We need to make sure that, when the Government draws up woodland grant schemes and peatland restoration schemes, insurance forms part of the proposal.

I also point out that retained crews across the Highlands lack the necessary equipment. Some of the retained crews do not even have showers at their stations, so they can be fighting fires all day and not even be able to get a shower before they go home.

Finally, I want to say that we need more assets. The Government has to draw together assets such as Argocats and the associated systems. It needs to have the ability to call on helicopters, and I strongly believe that, given the prevalence of wildfires across the UK, an aircraft that is capable of bombing fires with water should be available to both Governments. I urge the Scottish Government to liaise on that issue.

13:18

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** For years, I have travelled across the

Dava moor, making my way to the Cairngorms, Kingussie and onwards to the south and west, but nothing prepared me for the devastation that I encountered when I came over the brow of the hill on the moor this summer. Everywhere I looked, the land was black and charred. As I drove, it went on and on, with trees burned and whole hillsides ravaged by wildfire.

Earlier this summer, from the top of Cùl Mòr, I watched the fire on the side of Stac Pollaidh unfold in great yellow smoke clouds. In the aftermath of the Cannich wildfires, I met people who were on the ground at the time to understand the extent and impact of the event. I followed that up with visits to Inverness fire station to discuss the challenges that our fire and rescue teams face and what resources they need. I am also working with constituents who were traumatised by the lack of communication when the fires came close to their homes this summer.

Wildfires are no longer rare, and I am grateful that Emma Roddick has brought this issue to the chamber. Their frequency and intensity are increasing, driven by climate change, human activity and land management, and the Highlands are especially vulnerable, due to extensive peatlands, open moorland and remoteness.

Communities, living landscapes and emergency services are bearing the brunt. The environmental costs are staggering. Peatlands that should be locking in carbon instead go up in smoke, releasing vast amounts of greenhouse gases. One fire in the flow country released 700,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> in six days, doubling Scotland's emissions for that period. Fire strips hillsides bare, destroys habitats and undermines our climate targets.

Healthy ecosystems are our greatest defence. Rewetted peatlands and restored native woodlands are far more fire resistant than degraded moorland that is dominated by heather, and healthy soils hold more water, too, slowing the spread of flames. Where natural processes are restored, resilience increases; in North America, wetlands created by beavers have acted as natural firebreaks.

We must be honest about land management—

**Jim Fairlie:** Will the member give way?

**Ariane Burgess:** I do not have time.

Muirburn is often claimed as a prevention tool, but evidence shows that it is frequently the cause of wildfires getting out of control. We should not conflate muirburn with other fire management techniques, such as creating firebreaks or tactical burning during an emergency, which are very different in practice and risk. If we are serious about prevention, we must confront the reality that

large-scale burning of moorland is adding to, not reducing, the danger.

The issue connects directly to climate change. As our summers become hotter and drier, the risks multiply, and that makes it urgent for us to properly investigate and publicly report the causes of every wildfire. We need to learn, adapt and prevent repeat incidents.

Prevention is also about behaviour. Disposable barbecues are a known risk. Indeed, a constituent of mine told me of flames coming from a bin in a forestry car park; inside were three still-smouldering disposable barbecues. It was a fire waiting to happen, and it is time that we considered banning disposable barbecues altogether.

Meanwhile, rural fire crews—often on-call volunteers—are stretched to their limits. Communities step up, but they cannot be the last line of defence; we need a national strategy that joins up land use, climate action, biodiversity restoration and emergency response.

Let us not forget the public. Expanding the reach of the Scottish outdoor access code, increasing the number of countryside rangers and ensuring that people understand their responsibilities outdoors are all essential. This is not only about how we respond to fires once they are raging but about how we build landscapes and communities that are resilient in the first place—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you.

**Ariane Burgess:** It is time that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you. I call Ben Macpherson, to be followed by Tim Eagle. You have up to four minutes, Mr Macpherson.

13:22

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** Tackling climate change internationally is something that I am passionate about, like many others, but I have been passionate about it since way before that became a common view.

This is a global challenge. Although we need to think global and act local, we have to accept the reality: in terms of the numbers, we in Scotland have very little ability to tackle climate change at an international level. We are a small contributor to emissions, and given past emissions, and what other countries are emitting at present, our ability as a small country to affect climate change internationally is small, too. Yes, we should play our part; yes, we should do our bit; and yes, new technologies that we are leading on can make an impact beyond our shores, but our ability to effect

the cessation of or reduce global climate change is limited. We have to accept that fact, unfortunately.

No matter what we do, it is likely that, as we have seen in recent years, climate change will happen to us, because of the international situation. Therefore, although we should raise our voices to urge for more action internationally, we also need to think much more about adaptation and mitigation. We saw a shift in resources and focus towards that in the previous budget, which I welcomed; and we also saw investment in net zero, which has other benefits. As well as reducing emissions, that creates warmer homes, more breathable air and so on, as well as facilitating greater use and development of renewable energy. All those things are worth doing, but we need to think more in the long term about adaptation and mitigation, in relation to flooding as well as wildfires. That is why the debate is important.

The devastating impact of wildfires has been seen this summer. We are all afraid—and should be acting on the proposition—that wildfires are likely to happen more often as we see warmer and warmer weather. The motion understandably focuses on the Highlands, but wildfires have also affected us here in the capital city at Arthur's Seat, which is very close to where we are now. They are happening more and more.

We need action on prevention, education and minimising the risk of such fires, but we also need to have adequate resource to respond. That is why the capacity of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service matters so much. The service delivery review that is taking place is important, as we need to think strategically and effectively about how resources are allocated. However, as a local MSP, I am concerned about the proposal to close Marionville fire station. It is one of the closest fire stations to Arthur's Seat and it is in a growing city where the risk is growing.

As a society and a democracy, we, and the Government, need to think about long-term capacity building, not capacity reduction, and certainly not here in our growing capital city.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am conscious of the number of members who still want to participate in the debate, so I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Emma Roddick to move such a motion.

*Motion moved,*

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Emma Roddick*]

*Motion agreed to.*

13:26

**Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I congratulate Emma Roddick for bringing this much-needed debate to the Parliament. We have spoken about this topic separately.

I echo the points that have come from around the chamber. There is clearly anger and frustration about some of the fires that are happening across Scotland. I think, if I am right, that there is a consensus on and cross-party support for the need for action. I would be happy to join any meeting or round table that we could have with the minister to discuss what that action could be. I mean that in a positive way—I can see that the minister does not think so, but I genuinely do mean that in a positive way.

In recent years, Scotland has witnessed a deeply concerning trend. The number and intensity of wildfires across our country is growing. Such fires are not isolated incidents; they are becoming more frequent, more destructive and more dangerous for our people, our land and our wildlife.

I have put some of that into numbers. Although wildfire figures vary year to year, the upward trend is stark. Between 2024 and the first half of 2025, the number of recorded wildfires more than tripled, from 55 in all of 2024 to 187 in just the first six months of this year. That is already higher than any annual figure since 2017. We can safely assume that the total figure for 2025 will rise further, because the data does not yet include the peak summer months of July and August. To put that into perspective, the figure of 187 wildfires that have already been recorded in 2025 is close to double the total for 2015, when 111 wildfires were recorded. The direction of travel is undeniable: the number of wildfires in Scotland is rising.

The Highlands remain the most severely affected region by a large margin. Over the past decade, 574 wildfires have been recorded. This is a Highland issue—it is important to say that—but it is also a national issue with consequences for all of Scotland.

The problem is clear in Moray, too. This year alone, multiple incidents have underlined the urgency with which action is required. Moray Council, in a decision led by councillors Kathleen Robertson and Derek Ross, became the first council to take action in Scotland, agreeing a motion in August that recognised the devastation that has been caused by wildfires in the summer of 2025. The council committed to hold a wildfire summit, to consider new byelaws and to seek funding for wildfires from both Governments, just as other climate-driven challenges such as flooding and coastal erosion are already funded.

In recognising this trend, I also, as my colleagues have done, recognise those who stand on the front line. I pay huge tribute to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service for its professionalism and bravery in the most challenging of circumstances. It deserves the thanks of the Parliament and the whole country.

Equally, much of the immediate response came not from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service but from those who are closest to the land: gamekeepers—including our young gamekeepers—farmers, estate staff and local volunteers. Scottish Land & Estates reported that 33 businesses, including 27 estates, provided vital assistance during the wildfires in late June alone. Private land managers deployed equipment worth an estimated £3.1 million to contain the flames. Those contributions were not optional; they were essential.

Wildfires put human lives in danger. They devastate habitats and wildlife. They damage farming, sporting estates and tourism, and they place immense strain on rural communities. I urge everyone to remember that caution is essential during dry weather. A cigarette, a barbecue or even a spark from machinery can cause untold damage. The evidence is clear, the trends are undeniable, and I ask the Government to seriously consider the threat that we face.

In my opinion, Scotland needs a dedicated wildfire response unit with specialist training, modern equipment and, crucially, aerial firefighting support. That is how we will protect our communities, our land and our future.

13:30

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this very important issue to the chamber for debate. It is important to remember that wildfire risk exists across Scotland. Nowhere is immune, and that will only become more obvious as we experience more frequent extreme weather events. Aberdeen is already familiar with the problem, with the Gramps—Tulloch Hill—going up in flames again this year, and almost all of Scotland was categorised as having a high risk of wildfires in the summer months.

A key difference when a fire takes hold in the city of Aberdeen, compared with one on Dava moor or elsewhere around the Highlands, is that there is peat in the Highlands, which can continue burning for days or, more often than not, weeks. Land managers and gamekeepers know that. They know where the peat is and they know how to deal with it. I spend a lot of time in Emma Roddick's beautiful region, as well as in rural Aberdeenshire, and I have seen for myself the

expertise that exists in people's roles. Sadly, that expertise is often overlooked in a crisis, and that is to our detriment. However committed our fire brigade workers are, they will not know the ins and outs of what is happening with the ground where the most flammable vegetation is, and they will not know where the ground might be more resistant to catching, in the same way that someone who is out there every single day tending to it will.

I support Emma Roddick's comments about ensuring that the SFRS has the correct equipment available, but I urge our vital emergency services personnel to consider the value of what land managers and gamekeepers have to offer in a crisis, too. From knowing where natural fire breaks have been placed to being intimately aware of the most effective access points for emergency vehicles, their input is not just nice to have, it is crucial for fast action and fire resilience. That expertise is crucial in fire prevention as well as for the response.

Knowledge of how to safely carry out muirburn and prevent the build-up of dry vegetation is knowledge that we cannot afford to lose. We hear a lot about muirburn in wildfire discussions. Carried out responsibly in accordance with the muirburn code, it can be very effective in preventing wildfires from taking hold. I recognise that the Government is having to balance a lot of very important concerns when it comes to muirburn licensing, but I hope that consideration will be given to the issue and to how best to support those carrying out muirburn in any reviews of our wildfire policy.

I welcome the cross-party nature of the debate and my colleagues' calls for a collective effort to find a way forward for wildfire prevention and effective response, but that will be incomplete without direct engagement with Scotland's gamekeepers—on-the-ground professionals whose knowledge can help us to build the resilience that we need in rural communities.

Wildfires are a relevant issue to everyone in this country, and nowhere is immune from the risk, as Aberdeen knows. The increased potential for wildfires in rural areas and their capacity for destroying livelihoods and natural environments that we in urban areas rely on—whether in a broad sense of offsetting our carbon emissions and supporting biodiversity, which our cities struggle to maintain, or closer to home in the sense of getting food into our shops and on to our tables—should concern us and should provoke action from us all.

13:24

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I, too, congratulate Emma Roddick on securing the debate. I do not agree with every word in her

motion, but I supported it because I wanted to make sure that there was cross-party support so that we could at least have the debate.

Over the summer, I wrote to my friend and colleague Finlay Carson, who is convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, asking that a committee of the Parliament look at the issue, because it is of such great importance to both the Highlands and the rest of Scotland. What we witnessed in the early summer months was a horrific fire. I will not forget the scenes—or my kids' reaction when the sky went extremely dark in the middle of the day. It was a terrifying experience for those of us who were many miles away, and I know how bad it was for the people who were right at the centre of it.

On the day of that fire, I wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, in her role of leading on resilience, asking her to activate the Scottish Government's resilience room. She refused to do that, although she sent me helpful updates, which I appreciate. I do not understand why the biggest-ever wildfire in Scotland did not trigger the need for the Scottish Government's resilience room to be launched and opened. I know that the minister wanted to intervene on Fergus Ewing on that; I will give way to him if he wants to make the point now, or he may do so in his closing remarks. The point is important.

Ben Macpherson mentioned the wildfire on Arthur's Seat. That was serious. However, it got an immediate response from the First Minister, who was tweeting about it within minutes or hours. We got nothing from the First Minister of Scotland when the biggest-ever wildfire was affecting our communities in the north. I hope that the Government will reflect on that, because our words mean a lot and I was surprised that the Government was silent on the issue.

The ones who were not silent and who did not stand back were the firefighters, the gamekeepers, the farm labourers and the estate workers. I will be very clear: it was a horrendous wildfire that was threatening to get out of control. It was brought under control only because of the incredible efforts of those people, and because of mother nature—because we had one of the biggest rain storms that I can remember. The relief was palpable in Moray and the Highlands on that day. I had been worried that the wildfire would get out of control.

**Fergus Ewing:** Does Mr Ross agree with a keeper who told me that, had it not been for muirburn that was carried out in past years on the Muckrach estate, the fire would have reached Grantown and people would have died?

**Douglas Ross:** Yes, I agree, because I, too, have heard that.

Over the summer, I met representatives and owners of Moray estates, which are probably some of the biggest to be affected by the fire. To see the scale of devastation over the work that they have put into that area for so long is, to be frank, heartbreaking. We were extremely lucky that no lives were lost, but we lost much work that had been done to develop our peatlands and woodlands over many years—perhaps 30 years. All of it was lost in those fires.

I want a better response from the Scottish Government. I agree with Edward Mountain's point about assets. I was perhaps naive: I assumed that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service had assets such as helicopters that could come in and put water on the wildfires. I always assumed that those assets were Government or Fire and Rescue Service assets, but they were not. Those assets were used because estates spend a lot of money on insurance and can afford the use of those helicopters. If it was not for that, we would have been in an even worse state.

Finally, I will talk about something that is not a wildfire. We have been experiencing too many deliberate fires in Moray. In Lossiemouth, a spate of them have been worrying close to homes and individuals. One young person has now been arrested and charged. Since the Minister for Victims and Community Safety is here, I say that I want tougher punishments for people who wilfully set fires, because of the damage that they do.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I thank all members for their co-operation, which has allowed me to give all members an equal opportunity to participate in a heavily subscribed debate.

I call the minister to respond to the debate.

13:38

**The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie):** I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this extremely important members' business debate to the chamber. I will touch on some of the points that she made.

The increase in the frequency and intensity of wildfires in Scotland is not just a seasonal hazard but a stark warning to all of us. The fires are placing immense pressure on our rural communities and emergency services, devastating our landscapes, threatening our biodiversity and our rural livelihoods, and damaging critical infrastructure. All those points have been well made by colleagues across the parties.

Finlay Carson noted the excellent collaboration between farmers and keepers. He is absolutely correct that the fire would not have been brought

under control without the sterling efforts of all the land managers and land workers who were there.

The member talked about cuts to the fire service, as did the Labour member—I am sorry, but her name has gone out of my head. I say to them that there were no cuts to service delivery. The service delivery review is not about cuts, and no decisions have been made. The SFRS has said that, if it had an unlimited budget, it would still be carrying out the review, so it is not talking about cuts.

Emma Harper mentioned sky lanterns. Unfortunately, they are becoming fashionable again, so I will add my voice to hers and ask people not to use them. Not only do they choke livestock; they have the potential to burn areas, which could then lead to wildfires.

I thank Fergus Ewing for his phone call on 29 June. The fire started on 28 June and Mr Ewing phoned me the next day. I greatly appreciate the fact that he did so. He asked me to activate SGoRR. It was not within my gift to do so at that time, but the cabinet secretary gave me clear guidance and understanding that that step was not needed, because local resilience groups had already been set up.

I immediately phoned Angela Constance, Richard Lochhead, the Deputy First Minister, National Farmers Union Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates and the Scottish Gamekeepers Association to find out what the position was from people who were on the ground dealing with the fire at that time.

I had a holiday in the three weeks leading to my visit to Dava moor.

**Douglas Ross:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Jim Fairlie:** No, I will not.

The week after I came back, I attended the game fair and spoke to young keepers to get their perception of what had actually happened. I then attended the site with the keepers who had been on the ground at the time and also with representatives of the Cairngorms National Park Authority and NatureScot, officials from SFRS and other locals. We went on to have other meetings, and I have since met people from the SGA, SLE, RSPB and the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

It was therefore an example of really cheap politics when Tim Eagle sat on the BBC and said that I was turning up for a photo op. If we are to have co-operation, that kind of childish politics really has to be taken out of the—

**Tim Eagle:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Jim Fairlie:** No. I will be taking no interventions from any of you.

**Tim Eagle:** And you are telling me I am cheap?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Eagle.

**Jim Fairlie:** What will be happening as we go forward? On 25 September, there will be a series of SFRS debriefs. The Scottish multi-agency resilience training and exercising unit will have a debrief on 1 October and the public sector will have one on 9 October. There will be a stakeholders' meeting on 14 October, which will include me and the cabinet secretary.

Emma Roddick also talked about having byelaws to prevent people from using or buying barbecues. I get that idea, and it is something that we are looking at. Cairngorms national park has byelaws, approval of which sits with the minister. I absolutely accept that that idea should be looked at, but there are legal considerations that we have to take into account. That is one of the serious things that has to be done in government.

As far as the helicopters are concerned, I absolutely share people's concerns that we were not able to call on helicopters right there and then. That is one of the areas that we will consider as we move forward.

**Emma Roddick:** Can I press the minister on the legal considerations? Could he lay out exactly what they are? There is conflicting information out there, and people have the right to be able to scrutinise those reasons and push for badly needed action.

**Jim Fairlie:** We will get to all those points, including the one that Emma Roddick has just made, as we go through all the reviews that I have laid out for members today.

As far as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's equipment is concerned, we have announced a £1.6 million funding package that will go towards providing the equipment that is needed—the fogging units, the all-terrain vehicles to get people there and the trailers to get those vehicles to the sites. Those things are in train—they are all part of the process that is going on at the moment. I make that point because we take every single bit of this issue very seriously. Wildfire is a danger and it is present—it is here right now—so we have to make sure that we have resilience measures in place.

Ariane Burgess talked about being able to address wildfires through landscape management. She is correct to a certain extent, but I point out that every single type of landscape in the area—no matter whether it was part of a managed moor, moorland, wetland or rewilded land—was burned through, because the wildfire could not be brought under control.

The one point that I will agree with Douglas Ross on is that, had it not been for the keepers who were on the ground—and a great big plowt of rain—the fire would not have been stopped when it was.

To go back to another of Fergus Ewing's points, the local resilience group was set up and locals were contacted by it, as far as I am aware. If getting information to local people is an issue that we have to look at, I am absolutely prepared to take that to our future discussions.

I have laid out what the Government has done. To turn to the actions that we will take going forward, I am still working with organisations such as Scottish Land & Estates, the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, NFU Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that we get everything right. All those organisations will be in the room so that we can have such conversations. We will have those summits, and I am determined to rebuild our relationships with our keepers and land managers to ensure that we have co-operation.

I put on record my thanks to everyone concerned, including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and everyone else who came out and helped to deal with the fires.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate. I thank members for their co-operation, which allowed the debate to be concluded with everyone having had the chance to participate and also allowed time for parliamentary staff to prepare the chamber for this afternoon's business.

13:46

*Meeting suspended.*

14:00

*On resuming—*

## Motion of Condolence

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18531, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of condolence following the death of George Reid.

The Rt Hon Sir George Reid was held in high esteem by all, regardless of party and regardless of position. Elected Deputy Presiding Officer when the Parliament was established in 1999, George was then elected our second Presiding Officer in 2003—the only member of the Scottish Parliament to date to hold office as both a Deputy Presiding Officer and a Presiding Officer.

George's dedication to public service and caring for others was demonstrated throughout his life. He loved representing the people of Clackmannanshire, both as a member of Parliament and an MSP. Dedicated to his local area, but internationalist in outlook, George's life, service and influence as a journalist, a humanitarian leader and an elected representative reached far beyond these borders.

George loved Scotland and the Scottish Parliament. He served the Parliament as he served in all his roles—with dignity, dedication and determination. He drove forward the completion of this building with tenacity and commitment. He was immensely proud of it, and he delighted in people being welcomed into their Parliament. As an MSP staff member, as an MSP and as Presiding Officer, he offered me friendly support.

We are honoured today to welcome George's wife Daphne, his daughter Morag and other members of his family to Parliament. We share your loss, and we hope that you find some comfort and encouragement in the many tributes to a life so very well lived. George's manner of service—a unique combination of courtesy, humour and seriousness—was his mark. We will miss him, and we will remember him with deep affection and gratitude.

14:02

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** It is with enormous sadness but also with the warmest of heartfelt thanks that I rise to move the motion in my name to honour a true giant of my party, of this Parliament and of Scottish public life, Sir George Reid. I express my condolences and those of the people of Scotland to his wife Dee, to his daughter Morag, to his son-in-law Pete and to his grandchildren, and I welcome members of the family who join us in the gallery today.

Born in Tullibody, in the shadow of his beloved Ochil hills, George was a proud son of the wee county, a passionate advocate for the people and the communities of Clackmannanshire, and destined to make a huge impact on the lives of others far beyond Clackmannanshire's borders.

George was a distinguished journalist, academic, parliamentarian, humanitarian and public servant. As the last surviving member of the trailblazing group of Scottish National Party MPs elected in 1974, George was so proud to have served his home county both at Westminster and here in the Scottish Parliament, an institution that he dedicated so much of his life to establishing.

Although this Parliament reconvened in 1999, it truly came of age under George Reid's tenure as Presiding Officer. That stewardship reminded us that this Parliament and this country are at their best when we look outwards, not inwards. His finest speech in this Parliament was in the debate on the Iraq war in 2003, when he cautioned:

"The war has already claimed its first victim, which is the truth."—[*Official Report*, 13 March 2003; c 16446.]

Railing against that sentiment was not just something that George thought or said, or would have had others do; it was a value that he put into practice throughout his life.

His humanitarian and international outlook was at the heart of his life and work. He played a central role in the media coverage of the Ethiopian famine and worked tirelessly to provide assistance through the Red Cross and Red Crescent around the world. He used his remarkable knowledge, his experience and his intellect as a professorial fellow at the University of Stirling, teaching on international conflict and co-operation for the learning of others. That was typical of George.

Although an inspiring and captivating speaker, he was never content just to speak. He was always determined to act, to make a real difference and to use his huge intellect, his drive and his compassion for others to make the world a better place.

It was that determination that he brought to bear so effectively here in this Parliament. Those of us who served during his time as Presiding Officer will remember the extraordinary leadership that he provided, putting aside party and working truly in the national interest, ending the early struggles and controversies and truly cementing our Parliament's place as the centre of the political life of the nation. When the history of this Parliament is written, the role played by George Reid will be at its heart because he was a true statesman, a man whose life's work was devoted to, and has benefited, the whole nation of Scotland.

His unique and exemplary commitment to public service was recognised in his appointment by Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth as Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and to the Order of the Thistle, one of the ancient symbols of our nationhood.

George's political life was anchored in his drive to secure for Scotland her place as an outward-looking, equal and independent member of the family of nations. As a teenager, I heard his arguments for that cause. His advocacy—and that of his peers Winnie Ewing, Gordon Wilson and Margaret Ewing—for Scotland and for independence shaped the political convictions that I have held for my entire adult life. Throughout my parliamentary service, George Reid was a source of wise counsel and steadfast support. Leadership can be a lonely place, but I was always strengthened in exercising leadership by the encouragement and the deepest of loyalty of George Reid.

So it was when I visited George for the last time in July. Knowing that his life would soon come to an end, I listened to a wise man at peace with himself and as assured as any of us can ever be that he had led a fulfilled life of joy, of service and of love.

I feel immensely privileged that my life was enhanced by knowing George Reid and benefiting from his counsel. I would like to end this tribute by reflecting on a section of George's 1995 Donaldson lecture, an exposition of values and political thought that stands as a defining contribution to the development of my party and of modern Scottish politics. In that lecture, George said:

"Our future cannot be a continuation of our past. Too often, we Scots are concerned about the day before yesterday."

Instead, he implores us

"to say, with a sense of purpose, 'Today is tomorrow.'"

With those words, George encourages us to use today to secure the future, to think optimistically of what might be possible and to pursue a common determination to shape and improve Scotland's future. I commit today to doing that and, in so doing, I hope that that can be the on-going tribute of us all to the life and legacy of Sir George Reid.

I move,

That the Parliament expresses its profound sadness at the death of George Reid; extends its deepest sympathy and sincere condolences to his family and friends; appreciates the many years of public service that he gave as an MP, MSP, Presiding Officer, and Lord Lieutenant; recognises the substantial contribution that he made to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the securing of its place in the life of the nation, and acknowledges his humanitarian work over many decades and the high regard in which he was held by colleagues across the world.

[Applause.]

14:08

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I think I am now the only Conservative member to have served in this Parliament when Sir George Reid was Presiding Officer, and it is my honour to offer a few remarks in support of this motion of condolence.

I first met Sir George Reid when I came into this Parliament in 2001. At that point, he held the position of Deputy Presiding Officer, but I was aware of his history, his already having had a distinguished career in journalism and broadcasting, having been a member of Parliament in Westminster and more recently having worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

He made relatively few speeches during that first session of Parliament but, as we have already heard, when he did contribute, often on the international matters on which he had considerable expertise, his contributions always carried a great deal of authority. Whether or not one agreed with him, he was always someone worth listening to.

When Sir David Steel retired as Presiding Officer at the end of the first session, George was the natural successor to take over. It was a role that he was made for, as someone who had just the right level of gravitas and authority, as well as good humour, a twinkle in his eye and kindness towards individuals.

The second parliamentary session, which he presided over, became known as the rainbow Parliament, as it contained a motley assortment of smaller parties, including, most notably, a cluster of representatives from the Scottish Socialist Party. That brought a level of rhetoric and parliamentary disruption that had not been seen before and which has not been seen since—so far, at least. As the occupant of the chair, George tolerated that with as much good grace as he could muster, although, occasionally, one could not but notice a wry smile on his lips in reaction to what he was hearing and seeing.

His most significant contribution as Presiding Officer was to sort out the mess that the construction of this building had become. At that point, the project was years behind schedule and hundreds of millions of pounds over budget. Simply by the force of his personality and with his leadership, he pulled the whole thing together to ensure that the building was ready in time for the planned royal opening by the late Queen Elizabeth. It says in St Paul's cathedral, in tribute to Sir Christopher Wren, "If you look for his monument, look around you." We can say that of

this building, which is really a monument to Sir George Reid. Without his intervention, I fear that construction works might still be going on.

On retiring from Parliament in 2007, George went on to hold a number of significant roles. Unlike many in his party, he did not have an instinctive objection to the honours system and was pleased to accept the knighthood that was conferred on him by the late Queen Elizabeth, which was a fitting recognition of his years of public service. He went on to serve as the lord-lieutenant of his much-loved home county of Clackmannanshire and as the Queen's representative as the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

My wife and I were delighted to be hosted during that year's general assembly by George and Dee at Holyrood palace. For the duration of the general assembly, the Lord High Commissioner is treated, in effect, as a member of the royal family, living in the palace, being waited on by retainers, wining and dining on the finest of fare every night, and being driven around in a large limousine with the royal pennant flying on the wing, accompanied by police motorcycle outriders. I do not think that I am being unkind when I say that I think that George perhaps enjoyed that experience just a little bit too much.

I will always remember George for his kindness and friendship to me personally, as well as his many achievements in public life. He will be sadly missed. On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I offer my condolences to Dee and Morag and all the family. [*Applause.*]

14:12

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I want to associate all my colleagues with the First Minister's comments and put on record our deep sorrow at the passing of Sir George Reid, who was a public servant of remarkable skill, intelligence and commitment.

George Reid led a life that was dedicated to serving the people of our country and committed to making Scotland a better place. Many MSPs will have warm memories of George's time in this Parliament. Although that will be especially true of Scottish National Party members, that will not be exclusively the case. I know from lots of stories from those who served alongside Sir George how respected he was across every party in the Parliament.

George served diligently, including as Deputy Presiding Officer and later as Presiding Officer, but his time in this Parliament was only one tiny part of a remarkable career. George's remarkable life took him far from his Clackmannanshire home

to places around the world, from America to Armenia, always in the service of others.

After graduating from the University of St Andrews, George embarked on a career in journalism, in the course of which he worked for the BBC and Granada Television, as well as many of Scotland's flagship newspapers. Given that he was a person of strong political convictions, it was not long before George made the move into front-line politics. George was a committed Scottish nationalist. He joined the SNP as a young man when the party had little support in the country, and he was later elected as part of the SNP wave that was produced by the twin elections in 1974. He served his Clackmannanshire and East Stirlingshire constituents diligently over the turbulent years of the late 1970s, which included the rise of the Tories under Margaret Thatcher and the winter of discontent.

After leaving the Parliament in 1979, George returned to journalism, this time marrying his professional expertise with his vast experience of the world. George will be remembered as being a Scottish nationalist, but he was without a doubt an internationalist, as well—a man who cared deeply for the freedom and safety of, and justice for, all his fellow citizens, wherever they were across the globe. It was in that role that he performed some of his most lasting and important work. As has been mentioned, he produced the groundbreaking reports on the Ethiopian famine that awakened the world to the struggles and horrors that were being inflicted on the people of that country. Those reports moved so many people across the world that they led directly to Live Aid and the beginning of famine relief. After that, he worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. His work on supporting victims of the 1988 Armenian earthquake resulted in George receiving state honours from Armenia and the USSR.

When the campaign for devolution was won, George was ready to return to politics and to serve the people of Scotland. Sadly, I did not have the honour of serving in the Parliament at the same time as George, but I had the honour and privilege of meeting him on a number of occasions. What I remember most about Sir George is that, despite not being in the same party as me, he was nothing other than warm, compassionate and encouraging. I know that that was the case with many young people—and maybe older people—he met in politics across the years. He was always warm, always compassionate and always encouraging. That is the man we will remember so fondly. Indeed, it is that George—intelligent, patriotic, compassionate and warm—the Parliament and Scotland mourn today.

I again share the Scottish Labour Party's condolences on the death of Sir George Reid. Our thoughts are with Dee, Morag, his family, his many friends and the many colleagues who knew him and loved him so dearly. *[Applause.]*

14:16

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** I join colleagues across the Parliament—members and staff—in mourning the loss of Sir George Reid and in celebrating his life. We send our condolences and love to Dee, Morag and the family—not forgetting the dogs, of course.

George led a remarkable life as a journalist, politician, humanitarian and academic. He was a true polymath, and he drew on his unique breadth of experience to touch the lives of so many. Every chapter of his career left a lasting legacy. He remains the only MSP to have received the Soviet medal of honour for his outstanding work with the International Committee of the Red Cross in leading the response to the Armenian earthquake in 1988.

I first met him when I was a very nervous new MSP in 2003. We had lunch. I said that I had voted for him to be my constituency MSP and that I would be voting for him again to become the Presiding Officer of this Parliament. He was so warm and generous, and he was full of useful advice, which was offered kindly—and sometimes very directly. He helped me to make sense of those early days in the Parliament, and I know that many other MSPs also benefited from his mentoring. Later, when I lost my seat at Holyrood, I valued his encouragement, which, again, drew on his personal experience of moving between so many different roles, both in and out of politics.

I recently met his colleagues at the University of Stirling, where he worked right up until the final few weeks of his life—teaching, mentoring and challenging students, while drawing on that vast experience. I learned how his work had helped them, just as he had helped me and so many others.

We remember fondly how George could hold any gathering in the palm of his hand. He had a natural and formidable power of convenership—an essential skill in that rainbow Parliament of the second session, when shenanigans were rife. We remember how he chaired a major global conference in the Parliament, opening proceedings in not just one but two African languages before addressing delegates in Gaelic and then, finally, in English—it was classic George. His wit, charisma and gravitas could lift any gathering, however small, into a major event, making people feel special and connected to one another. I remember attending dinners with

international delegations that George hosted in his role as PO. They were enthralling. He would pull every thread of conversation in the room together, ensuring that no one was left behind. You had to sing for your supper, but you always left feeling part of something a wee bit special.

I have met so many staff in this building who loved working with George, in his time both as an MSP and then as Presiding Officer. Arguably, his greatest achievement in politics was steering this building—this village, as he loved to call it—to its completion. George was the right person at the right time to navigate the huge challenges of getting the building project on track and communicating that to a critical media. From the start, he brought his forensic attention to detail, demanding weekly updates of Gantt charts and critical paths, and he chivvied contractors to completion while delivering endless walk-throughs and interviews in multiple languages, explaining the challenges and progress of the project.

Colleagues remember a kind, shrewd, organised and tireless leader. We can only imagine what might have been if he had been able to take a more central role in the yes campaign for independence.

We celebrate the unique and remarkable life of Sir George Reid, a proud son of the wee county—much loved, and now much missed. *[Applause.]*

14:21

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** It is a tremendous privilege to pay tribute to Sir George Reid on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. His passing marks the loss of one of the most substantial figures in the life of the Parliament and the life of Scotland.

I met George only a handful of times, and only fleetingly, but I was always in awe of him and he was always generous with that time. I saw, from the outside, what this chamber meant to Sir George and, over time, what he would come to mean to the chamber.

He was a man of great intellect, deep compassion and integrity. From those roots in Tullibody, he never lost his pride in Clackmannanshire. He never forgot where he came from or what was behind him, but he was always looking forward and outward—a profound internationalist.

As we have heard, his career in journalism led him to the very heart of global events. In the Red Cross, he found not just a vocation but a calling. Working in places of conflict and of catastrophe, he brought humanity and hope where both were in short supply. He would later say that it was in that work that he did

“far more good than at any other time in”

his life.

In politics, George made his mark twice: first at Westminster, and then here in Holyrood. As Presiding Officer in the years between 2003 and 2007, he took the chair—as we have heard several times this afternoon—at a very difficult time for the fledgling Parliament. The Holyrood project was mired in delay and controversy, but Sir George always brought order, authority and dignity. He was determined—as he said—to move in and move on, and he succeeded.

By the time that he laid down the mace that sits before you, Presiding Officer, this Parliament was not just complete as a building; it was established in the minds of the Scottish people as the beating heart of the nation’s democracy.

Sir George was a man of principle, who was never afraid to speak truth plainly. As the First Minister rightly mentioned, his speech on the Iraq war, which was informed by his years of humanitarian service, was one of the finest that I have ever heard in the chamber, and I found such common cause with the words that he spoke that day.

Sir George was knighted in 2012 for his service to public life, but the honour that mattered most to him, as exemplified by his life’s work, was the chance to serve his community, his country and the cause of humanity.

On behalf of my party, I extend our profound condolences to his wife, Dee, to his daughter Morag and her family and to all those who mourn him today. [*Applause.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** The question is, that motion S6M-18531, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of condolence, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament expresses its profound sadness at the death of George Reid; extends its deepest sympathy and sincere condolences to his family and friends; appreciates the many years of public service that he gave as an MP, MSP, Presiding Officer, and Lord Lieutenant; recognises the substantial contribution that he made to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the securing of its place in the life of the nation, and acknowledges his humanitarian work over many decades and the high regard in which he was held by colleagues across the world.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will suspend the meeting briefly before we move to the next item of business.

14:24

*Meeting suspended.*

14:26

*On resuming—*

## Portfolio Question Time

### Education and Skills

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is portfolio question time. On this occasion, the portfolio is education and skills. I remind members that questions 2 and 7 have been grouped and that, therefore, I will take any supplementaries on those questions after the substantive questions have been asked and answered. There is quite a bit of interest in supplementaries, so the usual plea stands for brevity in questions and answers.

#### Education Infrastructure Investment

1. **Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it has invested in education infrastructure since 2011. (S6O-04954)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** The Scottish Government recognises the importance of education infrastructure as a foundation for delivering high-quality learning environments, supporting wellbeing and enabling long-term economic and social benefits. That is why, since 2011, we have invested significant funding of £2.8 billion in Scotland’s education estate. That investment has led to the proportion of schools in a good or satisfactory condition increasing from 62.7 per cent in 2007 to a record 92 per cent today. Our funding through the learning estate investment programme is helping to build on that remarkable progress.

**Gordon MacDonald:** I welcome the new, state-of-the-art Currie community high school, which opened at the start of the academic year in my constituency of Edinburgh Pentlands. Will the cabinet secretary outline when young people in the Wester Hailes area will have the opportunity to benefit from the new Wester Hailes high school, which is currently under construction?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I thank Gordon MacDonald for his question and look forward to attending the official opening of Currie community high school in November.

On his substantive point, I understand that the redevelopment of Wester Hailes high school is under way and that completion is expected in autumn 2026. As I mentioned in my previous response, the Government will provide further funding to the City of Edinburgh Council through the learning estate investment programme, with

funding of £16.8 million for that ambitious transformation, which will create lasting benefits for young people and the wider community.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There are a number of supplementaries. I will fit in as many as I can.

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** The cabinet secretary will know about the funding that the Scottish Government has given to Moray Council for a replacement Forres academy. That is very welcome, but there are significant concerns about the siting of the new school. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the money has been allocated to Moray Council, that the siting is a local decision and that, should the council decide to move the school to an alternative venue, that would not put the funding under threat?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I understand the challenges in relation to the new high school in Forres, and I am more than happy to write to the member on the specifics. I understand that the location is a matter for the local authority, but I will write to the member in due course to give him a specific answer.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** In Glasgow, a group of primary school pupils is campaigning because their school is not accessible for people who use wheelchairs and the outdoor shelter has been deemed unsafe. This week, data showed that more than 100 schools have not had their expected five-year suitability survey, which includes surveying suitability under the Equality Act 2010 and suitability of access. In the light of that, will the cabinet secretary say when every school will have a survey, ensure that there is the necessary investment and support, and work with the council to make sure that schools in Glasgow are accessible and that their playground shelters are safe?

**Jenny Gilruth:** The specific issue that the member raises is a matter for Glasgow City Council, as the local authority, in the first instance. However, she also raises a hugely important point in relation to accessibility. I am more than happy to ask my officials to engage with Glasgow City Council on the specifics of her question and to get back to the member in due course.

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** As a former councillor who campaigned and fought alongside the community, I can report that the new facilities in Currie are quite special. However, the campus is far from complete. Following the demolition of the old building, the ambitious plans to create outdoor learning spaces and first-class sports facilities are under threat. Will the cabinet secretary meet me and parents to understand the need for the ambitious campus to be delivered as promised, following the successful community

campaign to keep both Currie and Wester Hailes high schools in the heart of their respective communities?

**Jenny Gilruth:** Ms Webber raises an important point, and I am more than happy to meet her and campaigners. We have provided the City of Edinburgh Council with significant funding for both schools. Since 2021, we have provided total funding of £64 million towards the construction of four new schools. I am more than happy to meet the member and campaigners in relation to the points that she has made.

### **Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill**

**2. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill aims to give school pupils an independent right to opt in, but not opt out, of religious observance. (S6O-04955)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** The bill, in its current form, will strengthen the rights of children and young people in Scotland, building on our commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The changes aim to strike a balance between that commitment, parental rights, the wide range of stakeholder views and the practicality of implementing the changes for schools. The approach represents a clear improvement in the consideration of children's and young people's views on withdrawal from religious observance. In accordance with current guidance, schools should already take an inclusive approach to religious observance, reflecting the diversity of faith and belief in the school community.

**Emma Roddick:** There is a fundamental inequality in that. Although the bill gives school pupils the right to overrule their parents in order to opt in to religious observance, non-religious children will still need parental permission to opt out. That creates a hierarchy of beliefs, with the views of religious pupils being taken more seriously than those of non-religious children and young people. Why is that? Will the cabinet secretary address that worrying bias, or are religious children's views officially more valid than the views of those who do not hold those beliefs?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I do not agree with the substantive final point of Emma Roddick's question. I am more than happy to engage with the member on that point. Today, my private office has reached out to all members of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, which will be considering the bill in due course, to offer to engage directly. I met the Humanist Society only

last week to hear some of the points that Emma Roddick has raised. The point that I made in my initial response is that it is important that the Government strikes a balance in relation to the rights of parents and the rights of children and young people. We need to be mindful of that balance and of it potentially becoming out of kilter.

The aim of the bill is to ensure that, in the context of the long-standing parental right to withdraw a child from religious observance, children's and young people's views are given due weight in that process. I think that that was the member's substantive point, and the provisions in the bill reflect that aim. It is a technical bill that aims to strengthen our alignment with the UNCRC, and it will put the position in relation to ministers' UNCRC obligations in this area beyond doubt. As I said, I am more than happy to meet members, and the committee will consider the bill in due course.

### “Preaching is not Teaching”

**7. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the recently published report by Humanist Society Scotland, “Preaching is not Teaching”, regarding concerns that pupils in non-denominational schools may feel compelled to take part in religious worship activities against their own wishes. (S6O-04960)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** The Scottish Government welcomes the Humanist Society's report, which helpfully adds to the literature regarding current practice of religious observance—or RO—and the right of parents to withdraw pupils from it. Evidence shows how inclusive and pluralistic religious observance can support all pupils' spiritual and moral development. I met with the Humanist Society last week and have asked it to share further information on its examples of RO not being delivered inclusively. Guidance is clear that religious observance should be inclusive for those of all faiths and none.

**Elena Whitham:** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a member of the Humanist Society Scotland.

Given that more than 70 per cent of Scottish pupils now identify as non-religious or as having non-Christian beliefs, I am deeply concerned that non-denominational schools are still able to deliver an exclusively Christian programme of religious observance. In the report, one parent explained that their child was pressured to pray out loud and reprimanded for choosing to stay quiet, leaving her distressed and ashamed. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that represents a clear failure to respect a child's right to their own beliefs—a fundamental human right that is protected under

the UNCRC—and that pupils should be given the ability to independently opt out of religious observance?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I, too, am concerned by some of the issues that have been raised in the Humanist Society Scotland report. As I mentioned, I discussed those with the society last week. As I said, I have asked the society whether it can share further information on the examples that the member has cited in order to look at whether more can be done to ensure that religious observance is delivered inclusively in all schools.

The experience of the young person who was mentioned in the question does not sound consistent at all with the guidance that religious observance in schools should be sensitive to all spiritual needs and beliefs and be inclusive for those of all faiths and none. I would be happy for the member to write to me with further details, but, as I said, I have asked the Humanist Society Scotland for further detail in relation to that matter.

As I mentioned, the Scottish Government has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders on the bill's proposals, and I will continue to engage with members as the bill makes its way through Parliament.

### Higher Education Sector (Dispute)

**3. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what interventions it has made to end the current dispute over jobs and cuts in the higher education sector. (S6O-04956)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey):** Although universities are autonomous institutions with responsibility for their own operational and staffing matters, I have continued to encourage university leaders to engage constructively with trade unions and to seek resolution to local disputes in line with fair work principles. That should include meaningful staff consultation on the potential impact of their cost-saving programmes and working together with staff and trade unions to ensure that workers are treated fairly. Compulsory redundancies should be considered only as a last resort, after all other cost-saving measures have been fully explored.

**Richard Leonard:** I thank the minister for that reply. The University of Edinburgh is our largest university and one of the most prestigious. It is currently in dispute with the University and College Union over job losses and a failure to rule out compulsory redundancies. UCU members took strike action on Friday 20 June and a further five days from 8 September. While senior managers held dispute resolution talks with the UCU on 12 June, ahead of the first strike day, and met the

joint unions on 24 July, the university has made no effort since then to meet with the UCU and is instead moving ahead with job cuts through so-called targeted voluntary redundancy. How does the minister believe this fits with the Scottish Government's fair work first principles and the fair work dimensions of effective voice, security and respect?

**Graeme Dey:** I have already outlined what our expectations are around these matters. Richard Leonard paints a picture with a very specific interpretation of what is happening at the University of Edinburgh. He will appreciate that I am not fully sighted on the detail that he has outlined. However, I undertake, through the Scottish Funding Council, to seek to explore the very points that he has made, and I will come back to the member on that.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** The signs of stress in the higher education system are clear, as Richard Leonard has set out. Does the minister accept that the current financial model for higher education is broken? Will he set out what discussions he has had with Universities Scotland and others about a potential new financial model?

**Graeme Dey:** As Willie Rennie is aware, there have been on-going discussions with the sector about that very point: looking to a more sustainable long-term financial model. In fact, I hope that we will be able to make a joint announcement in the next few weeks that will outline the detail of that.

I offer a reassurance, which perhaps goes to the concerns that Richard Leonard has articulated, that, whatever process is followed and whatever the direction of travel is, trade unions, staff and students will also be able to input to that process, because I absolutely recognise that we need to move to a more sustainable long-term model for our institutions.

#### **Additional Support for Learning (Rural Schools)**

4. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that pupils attending smaller rural schools are receiving the additional support for learning that they need. (S6O-04957)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** All children and young people should receive the support that they need to reach their full potential. Local authorities oversee the delivery of education and they have a statutory duty to identify the need for, provide and review support for pupils with additional support needs in their local community, including in schools in rural areas. Spending on additional support for learning by local authorities reached a

record high of more than £1 billion in 2023-24, and the 2025-26 budget sets out a further £29 million of additional investment by the Scottish Government for ASN.

**Oliver Mundell:** On behalf of parents, pupils and teachers, I ask the cabinet secretary: what are they to do when that does not happen? In Dumfries and Galloway, resources are being rationed and smaller schools are being disadvantaged, often having a learning assistant for a fraction of the week. I hope that the cabinet secretary, as a former teacher, will understand the pressure that it creates when support is not there for a young person at the time when they need it, which can often be unpredictable.

**Jenny Gilruth:** The member's substantive point was about how we can ensure that Government money, which has been protected by the Government centrally, is used at the local level to deliver on what we expect.

Some of that work is being undertaken through our relationship with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the education and childcare assurance board to ensure that ASN funding gets to classrooms and to those who need it most.

The Parliament has committed the Government to leading a review on additional support needs. Colleagues from the member's party were at a round table with me two weeks ago to agree some of the parameters of what that review will look at. I am keen to look at how we can ensure that funding that is protected in the Government's budget makes its way into the classrooms, where it can make the biggest difference.

My final point relates to school funding. The member might be aware of an appointment that I announced at the start of the term in relation to school governance, school funding and what comes next, in terms of the Scottish attainment challenge and the pupil equity fund. John Wilson, who was formerly a headteacher in Edinburgh, has been appointed to lead hugely important work on those things. We will look at all those matters in the round. I encourage the member to engage with John Wilson as part of his independent review of how we fund our schools, because there is an opportunity through that work to answer some of the challenges that the member quite rightly raised today.

#### **Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill**

5. **Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with outdoor education centres and schools regarding the financial and staffing implications of the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill. (S6O-04958)

**The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes):** The Scottish Government has engaged with stakeholders on our outstanding concerns about the bill, which relate to affordability, equity for pupils with additional support needs and the workforce.

I met the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres on 25 February, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on 6 August and trade unions on 25 August. Since the introduction of the bill, officials have also engaged the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and the national complex needs network. I will confirm to Parliament the Government's position on the financial resolution for the bill by 26 September.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am grateful to the minister for that response and for the meetings that were held in February and August, but Government is about choice and the Parliament is the people's voice of account. Government's use of process instead of choice is disappointing. What explanation can the minister give as to why process was chosen instead of debating a motion on the financial memorandum, given that meetings were held in February and August and that all the outreach that she has just spoken of could have fed into such a debate?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** The question by Mr Whitfield presupposes the outcome of a Government decision on the financial resolution. I remind Parliament that, as I confirmed during the members' business debate and in committee sessions last week, the financial resolution process is a legitimate and important process that ensures that ministers can exercise our unique responsibility and accountability for appropriate management of the Scottish budget. The process is not unique to the Scottish Government; the Welsh Government, the United Kingdom Government and Northern Ireland Administrations have similar processes.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I am very much looking forward to meeting the cabinet secretary and the minister later this afternoon to discuss the bill. In relation to discussions with the outdoor education sector, what information has the Scottish Government received about my proposals for ways to reduce the cost of the bill?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** I have said before that I might not have discussed those exact proposals with the outdoor education sector due to the timing of the meetings. However, I have confirmed to Liz Smith that the proposals that she has made to reduce some of the implications of the bill around affordability and readiness are very welcome and are helping to inform the decision on the financial resolution.

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** Will the minister outline how the Scottish Government is supporting the delivery of outdoor learning in schools across Scotland?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** The bill has provided a good opportunity to discuss and highlight the amount of outdoor education that is already happening in Scotland. Outdoor education is an area of Government focus in our 2023 to 2030 learning for sustainability action plan and in reform through the curriculum improvement cycle. We continue to support investment in outdoor learning through the Scottish attainment challenge, pupil equity funding and phase 3 of our learning estate investment programme.

### Nursery Mothballing (Guidance)

**6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its on-going review of the guidance on the mothballing of nurseries. (S6O-04959)

**The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes):** Scottish ministers have committed to updating the advice to local authorities on mothballing that is contained in the statutory guidance for the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. Scottish Government officials continue to engage with local authorities, parent representatives and other stakeholders as part of that work, and we aim to provide an update to Parliament as soon as possible during the autumn term. While the review is under way, the existing guidance on mothballing remains in place. Decisions relating to the learning estate, including nurseries, are the responsibility of local authorities.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I am pleased to hear that there will be an update this term. However, I believe that, under the guidance from the Scottish National Party Government, nurseries in rural areas are under threat. Parents in the Scottish Borders have legitimate concerns about the mothballing process and the Government's guidance on it. Does the minister agree that, to address those concerns, any proposals right now to mothball nurseries must be paused until the Government has published the guidance? It seems apparent, if the written answers are anything to go by, that the review on mothballing will find that it is entirely inappropriate action for local authorities to take.

**Natalie Don-Innes:** As I said, local decisions are for local authorities. However, any decisions that impact on nursery provision should be made in consultation with local communities and affected parents and families. I have been clear that the mothballing guidance remains in place. We will provide an update on the review in the autumn,

which will take the appropriate steps to help to make the process clearer and more effective for parents.

We need to remember that mothballing is an important process for local authorities to manage their learning estate, so a balance has to be struck. I am happy to provide an update to Parliament in the autumn on the review of the guidance, as I have stated.

### **Construction Sector (Training and Apprenticeships)**

**8. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any steps it is taking to expand the availability of training and apprenticeships in the construction sector, in light of reported industry concerns about a growing skills gap. (S6O-04961)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey):** The Scottish Government is committed to addressing skills gaps in the construction sector. As the member may know, we are introducing a new Government-led approach to skills planning to better meet the needs of individuals, employers and the economy. Additionally, the Scottish Funding Council is leading a short-life stakeholder group to better understand industry needs and identify areas for action. In parallel, a working group of the ministerially chaired Construction Leadership Forum is exploring measures to support the sector. Those efforts are part of a broader commitment to creating a more responsive and effective system of workforce development in construction.

**Meghan Gallacher:** The minister will be aware that we are in a housing emergency. We have a shortage of homes, and we need the skills to build those homes throughout the country. The minister referred to the Scottish Government's skills investment plan for construction, yet the warning signs about an ageing workforce, declining numbers in key trades and the urgent need to attract young people through schools and apprenticeships were there years ago. How does the minister plan to speed up the process of trying to get young people into the construction industry, making it a viable workforce and an area where young people feel confident that their jobs will be there for life?

**Graeme Dey:** The short-life working group that I referred to resulted from a round-table meeting that I convened recently involving the Construction Industry Training Board, colleges, the SFC, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Skills Development Scotland and the career services collaborative to explore how we can deliver short, medium and long-term solutions to the issue.

I very much welcome the measured and constructive approach by the Federation of Master Builders and the Chartered Institute of Building, especially their recognition that, in order to resolve the challenges that Meghan Gallacher highlights, they need to work more closely with the Government and training providers. I advise members that my officials have invited the FMB on to the short-life working group, because the FMB clearly wants to find solutions of the type that Meghan Gallacher alludes to.

As I have said previously, this is not only about trying to deal with the immediate term, when Brexit, among other things, has had a detrimental impact on workforce availability; it is about the medium to longer term. Front and centre of that is unpacking a situation in which thousands of young people each year enter and, in large numbers, pass construction courses of varying types in our colleges, but only about 15 per cent go on to work in the sector. We need to get to the bottom of that. I hope that that gives Meghan Gallacher a degree of reassurance about how seriously we should treat that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** A number of members want to ask supplementary questions. I doubt that I will get through all of them, but I will do my best.

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** I have supported the construction skills demonstrations delivered by the Scottish Traditional Building Forum since 2013, and I welcome the construction pathway, including the delivery of a national 5 creative industries pilot at Wester Hailes high school. The nat 5 created parity with academic qualifications, so I welcome that it has been expanded in this academic year to include Currie community high school.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Ask a question.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Would the minister consider meeting the Scottish Traditional Building Forum to discuss a long-term and sustainable model for delivery to help young people across Scotland to benefit from that opportunity?

**Graeme Dey:** Yes.

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** In June, I hosted a parliamentary reception for the National Federation of Roofing Contractors, which was well supported by MSPs from across the chamber. Speakers at the event highlighted the personal challenges for apprentices in getting to college for training purposes, which I have raised with the minister previously. In my South Scotland region, some apprentices are forced to complete a four-hour daily commute to undertake college-based training. Does the minister think that that is acceptable and equitable, and what can be done about it?

**Graeme Dey:** I am well aware of the instance that Carol Mochan refers to. From my conversations with the Construction Industry Training Board, which has been very receptive on the issue, there is a recognition that we need to get smaller employers to come together to assure individual training providers—whether they are colleges or the private sector—that they can provide a critical mass of students in a locality and, thereafter, a pipeline of students. If they do that, I know that colleges are willing to consider running courses in more places, but we need both of those things to come together.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** What role will construction employers have in setting the number of apprentices, especially in the light of the recommendations in the Withers review?

**Graeme Dey:** Employers have input—of course they do—but they do not set the number of apprenticeships.

**Stephen Kerr:** Why not?

**Graeme Dey:** That would be entirely inappropriate, but they can have input to it. However, just for Stephen Kerr's understanding, 25.6 per cent of the apprentices that were allocated in Scotland in 2024-25 went to the construction and related occupational grouping, so a large number of apprentices are already allocated there.

I do not doubt for one moment that, if we were to increase that number, which we may well do in future, Stephen Kerr would be back in the chamber, if he is re-elected, calling for more apprentices in other sectors. The numbers point to the fact that we very much recognise the importance of construction.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** With apologies to members whom I was not able to call, that concludes portfolio question time. To allow the members on the front benches to change, there will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

## Care (Isle of Skye)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on improving care on the Isle of Skye. The cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues raised by his statement afterwards, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

14:53

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray):** As part of my summer tour, I travelled to Skye and visited Broadford and Portree hospitals as well as Home Farm care home. I went to hear directly from the public in Skye about the challenges in providing urgent care services, and to see how we can work together to address them. I was proud to meet dedicated staff, including nurses, advanced nurse practitioners, doctors and paramedics, local community groups and the co-chairs of Sir Lewis Ritchie's steering group, alongside the Deputy First Minister in her constituency capacity.

Let me provide some important context. In February 2018, Sir Lewis Ritchie, a respected academic general practitioner, was asked by the chair of NHS Highland to carry out a review of urgent care services in Skye, Lochalsh and south-west Ross. That review came after a period of serious staffing challenges, most acutely in Portree, which led to a breakdown in resilient out-of-hours care provision. It recommended essential improvements for sustainable 24/7 urgent care and in-patient services at Portree hospital in tandem with the services provided at Broadford hospital. The review also emphasised the excellent care that is provided to the public by clinical, social and support care staff.

During his expert group's review process, Sir Lewis talked to and listened to many, including the public who receive services and the staff who are working tirelessly to deliver them. My recent visit to Broadford and Portree was also about listening and learning. The people of Skye spoke out because they feared the loss of vital health services that they depend on. I am clear that recent incidents that have been highlighted in the media about difficulties accessing services are not acceptable, and I understand why the people of Skye have felt frustrated.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of the community representative groups in Skye who ensured that their voices were heard on those important issues. Throughout 2018, Sir Lewis met local communities and their representatives in Skye, Lochalsh and south-west Ross, and he also engaged with the

leadership team at NHS Highland. From there, independent facilitators were appointed to drive forward a range of recommended changes. I am pleased to say that real, positive progress began to take shape. Importantly, every single one of Sir Lewis's recommendations was accepted by NHS Highland.

However, as we know, the journey since then has not been without setbacks. The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic brought severe operational challenges. Progress stalled and, in some areas, was even reversed as staff left their posts and NHS Highland struggled to recruit those who were needed to deliver a safe and sustainable service. Regrettably, that led to a further breakdown in trust between NHS Highland and the communities of Skye.

However, let me be clear: during my recent visit and through continued engagement with the board, I have been assured that NHS Highland is fully committed to rebuilding that relationship. NHS Highland will work hand in hand with the people of Skye to deliver a service that is safe, suitable and sustainable. I welcome that commitment and will ensure that the Scottish Government provides its full support to NHS Highland to enable the board to implement the service.

Portree hospital provides in-patient, out-patient and urgent care facilities and is a base for the Scottish Ambulance Service. Currently, the hospital has capacity for 12 in-patient beds, but utilisation of those beds can vary depending on patient need and availability of staff. The hospital is utilising up to eight beds while the board completes recruitment to all established vacancies. Agency staff are supporting the in-patient service in the short term until that is achieved. As for the site's future, since the review's initial report was published, NHS Highland has been clear that Portree hospital will remain open and will provide a range of key services.

I am clear that the local community's voice must be central in any decisions that are taken and that that will be done through Sir Lewis Ritchie's implementation steering group. For a number of years now, the group has been the vehicle for many members of the community to voice their concerns, communicate directly with the board and work collaboratively with it on important issues.

As a result of the implementation of Sir Lewis's recommendations, significant improvements have been made to urgent care services in Skye. Urgent care at Portree hospital is provided 24/7 by an integrated team of clinical staff, which includes registered nursing staff, advanced nurse practitioners and paramedics. They can all assess patients and respond to a range of minor injuries.

Members might recall the tragic incident that took place at the Skye music festival in May 2024, when one person sadly lost their life and another person was unable to access urgent care support from clinical staff at Portree hospital. NHS Highland learned many important lessons following that event. A new service model was implemented in August of the same year, which enabled there to be access to 24/7 urgent care at Portree hospital.

NHS Highland has pursued a number of successful recruitment initiatives in partnership with the local community. It has considered meeting the accommodation needs of clinical staff and looked at developing training opportunities. I am pleased to say that that approach has led to successful appointments to all advanced nurse practitioner vacancies in Skye. All the new permanent staff will be in place by the end of this year. In addition, on 8 September, a new team lead for urgent care took up his post, which is a crucial appointment to support the service's expertise and resilience. His role will span urgent care on the hospital sites at both Portree and Broadford, to ensure a seamless service and to develop the integrated model that NHS Highland aims to achieve.

NHS Highland continues to build the resilience of the service by investing in staff training and development, to ensure that the highest level of clinical expertise is available to Skye patients 24/7. Paramedics, ward nurses and advanced nurse practitioners are working together, as a multidisciplinary team across the hospital, to share knowledge and skills and optimise the quality of the care that they can give.

When I visited Skye, I stressed the importance of effective communication with the public about how to access urgent care. That is essential in order to build trust and confidence in the resilience and availability of the service. We know that NHS 24 plays a vital role in responding to patients as a first point of contact, and its staff are trained to direct patients to the right place to get help. NHS Highland continues to work in tandem with NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service to ensure that patients in Skye know how to access the healthcare that they need, when they need it.

In August, in collaboration with NHS Highland, NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service undertook a leaflet drop to approximately 6,000 households in Skye, to highlight the urgent care services that are on offer and explain how to access them. NHS Highland will continue to monitor the effectiveness of such campaigns and will work together with local community representatives to ensure that a consistent communication plan about the services is agreed and implemented.

Members—and you in particular, Presiding Officer—will be aware that I grew up in Orkney, and I know all too well that living and working in rural and island communities brings with it challenges. In Skye in particular there are concerns about the availability of affordable housing, which was the subject of one of the recommendations in Sir Lewis’s review. That is why the Scottish Government is making up to £25 million available to local authorities and registered social landlords to enable them to acquire suitable homes to support the needs of key workers, where required. Beyond that, the Scottish Government has established a number of other initiatives to support rural and island healthcare, including committing more than £3 million to progress the national centre for remote and rural health and care, which launched in October 2023. The centre is working with health boards and health and social care partnerships to ensure that we avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

We also established the remote, rural and islands task and finish group to develop a sustainable model for delivery of healthcare for those communities and reflect the unique needs of those areas. That includes better use of digital tools, mobile services and local workforce solutions. That work is helping to shape a tiered framework for healthcare delivery, ensuring that care is provided as close to home as possible, while also improving access to specialist services when needed. Board chief executives will discuss that work in October. A programme of rural and island specific training sessions is also in development, with two pieces of work already in progress, which focus on dispensing practices and developing supervisory training hubs.

I understand the concerns that are shared by communities in Skye. I appreciate that it has been seven years since Sir Lewis Ritchie’s report, but it is right that NHS Highland has been given the time and the space to rebuild its workforce and to address the wider barriers that stand in the way of delivering sustainable services. However, I am also clear that we must see continued improvement. Any future decisions that are taken on the provision of services must be based on the right clinical evidence and take into consideration the impact on local accessibility and, importantly, equity.

It is my pledge that the Scottish Government will do all that it can to assist NHS Highland and to ensure that the voices of the people of Skye are well represented in decisions that are taken. Indeed, that is a wider pledge to all rural and island communities in Scotland. As an islander myself, I understand the challenges and I assure people in those areas that this is a Government that will continue to listen to them and learn from them.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for those, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business. I encourage members who wish to ask a question to make sure that they have pressed their request-to-speak buttons.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement, but it is a statement that should not have had to have been made. Last year, when apologising to Eilidh Beaton for the frightening experience that she had to endure, John Swinney said that it should never have been allowed to happen, that it was

“a matter of deep concern”

to the Government that Sir Lewis Ritchie’s recommendations had not been delivered and that Neil Gray had told NHS Highland the previous day that Portree community hospital should be returned to use as a 24/7 emergency facility

“at the earliest possible opportunity.”—[*Official Report*, 16 May 2024; c 10.]

However, here we are again, because that did not happen. There was a short period of improved service, but people were still turned or directed away from Portree hospital before NHS Highland finally admitted to SOS-NHS Skye campaigners in June that its model was not working.

We must all recognise that the people of north Skye have been badly served. Time and again, the Government and NHS Highland have not delivered what they promised, which is a sustainable 24-hour urgent care service at Portree that is accessible to local people.

In today’s statement, Neil Gray has largely passed the buck to NHS Highland, as the Scottish Government has repeatedly done. Will he accept that there is nothing in his statement that outlines action that the Scottish Government is taking specifically to improve the situation in north Skye? However, if he thinks that what he has announced today will work and will restore long-term sustainable 24-hour urgent care at Portree hospital, can he tell us when will that happen?

Local people do not want more empty promises; they want a proper, sustainable plan to deliver 24-hour urgent care at Portree, and they want a long-term vision for their hospital. Today, Neil Gray has said that things will improve. He said the same thing to campaigners last month. Their response was:

“That’s what NHS Highland said 7 years ago, and every year since.”

**Neil Gray:** I had the opportunity to meet campaigners, and I heard their concerns very

clearly. I can understand their frustrations, and, in my statement, I set out where those frustrations come from. As an islander, like Mr Halcro Johnston, I readily understand their perspective.

There were a number of inaccuracies in Mr Halcro Johnston's question that I need to correct. First, NHS Highland has not said that the model is not working; it has said that it is challenging, which is different. He suggested that accessible 24-hour urgent care is not available, but that is not true—it is currently available, and I was able to see how that is working.

On the Scottish Government's interventions, I have already set out in my statement the work that we are doing to support NHS Highland, which has allowed the board to move forward with recruitment work and with the model of change that came about in August.

In collaboration with NHS Highland, my commitment as cabinet secretary to the people of Skye is that the investments that are being made and the additional recruitment that has been undertaken will offer a 24/7 out-of-hour service on a sustainable basis.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** Those steps have already been made, yet nothing has changed, and there is no new action outlined in today's statement that gives confidence that there will be any change. The cabinet secretary himself admits that seven years is already far too long to wait, yet it will be at least eight years before the changes that he has talked about materialise—that is, if they materialise.

The posts have been filled before, only to have applicants pull out because they cannot find a home in Skye. The key workers housing fund has been available for three years, yet it has not been used in Portree, and it only has two years left to run. What has changed that will make these promises a reality? When will the people of north Skye have a health service that they can rely on? Is this just another pre-election promise with no hope of delivery?

**Neil Gray:** The reason why I am here setting out the statement is that there was a request from parties in the Parliamentary Bureau for there to be a statement providing an update. The fundamental change happened last summer when the model that was deployed by NHS Highland was updated off the back of the tragic incidents that took place in Skye, also last summer. The Government has provided NHS Highland with support to undertake necessary recruitment, for example of advanced nurse practitioners; support the training that is taking place for all staff on the Portree site; and ensure the co-ordination that is being delivered by the new director for urgent care services, which will all help to ensure that the sustainable service

that Rhoda Grant rightly asked for can be maintained.

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** The implementation of the Ritchie recommendations is badly needed, and I am glad to hear of progress, although I recognise that the time between now and the publication of the recommendations in 2018 has meant a loss of trust and continued frustration about services. Recruitment and retention of staff will be critical to ensuring that future work is successful. Will the cabinet secretary speak to how that will be prioritised and what the key barriers are to securing a full workforce?

**Neil Gray:** I absolutely understand that issue and reflected in my statement on the frustrations and the time that it has taken to get to this point. Emma Roddick is absolutely right about recruitment. The recruitment processes are under way, and we expect the full staff complement to be in place by the end of the year.

What is not helping us in relation to recruitment is, as I have already set out, the housing situation—which we are investing in and supporting in communities around Skye and in other parts of rural and island Scotland—as well as the very restrictive migration situation that has been perpetrated by the Labour United Kingdom Government, in which we have seen a 77 per cent reduction in the number of health and care visas that have been offered over the past year.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I welcomed the Lewis Ritchie report in 2018, and I was delighted to play a part in some of the recommendations. One of the recommendations was that a fast-response vehicle and a paramedic should be based at Portree hospital. I think that the fast-response vehicle cost £100,000. In 2024, the fast-response vehicle was seen heading towards Fort William. Is it back? Is it manned? Will it be replaced in 2025, when its life is determined to be up?

**Neil Gray:** I heard about the situation with regard to the rapid-response vehicle when I was meeting campaigners. I also heard about the positioning of the Ambulance Service at Portree and about how the Ambulance Service staff are helping as a multidisciplinary team to ensure that safe and sustainable services can be delivered on a continuing basis at Portree.

I am grateful to Edward Mountain for his collaboration in Sir Lewis Ritchie's report, and I would be happy to write to him with more detail on his further questions.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** I am proud that the Scottish Government's 2025-26 budget, which Labour and the Tories did not vote for, provides increased investment of

£133 million from 2024-25 for NHS Highland. How has that additional funding been, and how will it continue to be, used to support our island communities, such as the Isle of Skye?

**Neil Gray:** In 2025-26, all boards received increased investment in their baseline funding, with NHS Highland receiving more than £940 million. As has been set out, that represented increased investment of £133 million from 2024-25, including additional funding to provide for prior pay deals, as well as a range of funding to support vital front-line services.

NHS Highland's funding for 2025-26 will support delivery of commitments such as providing direct access to front-door frailty services at its acute site, improving community capacity and fully delivering the 2025-26 discharge without delay programme principles in all in-patient sites, ensuring timely discharge planning, the full use of multidisciplinary teams and the expansion of hospital at home services.

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement. The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee had the opportunity to visit Skye in May 2024, which was an insightful visit, certainly for me as a rather parochial Glaswegian—it was my first visit to the island. The insights of the staff at Portree and at Broadford were instructive.

On that visit, some helpful suggestions were made. One that stuck out for me was that the abandoned old Broadford hospital buildings that were boarded up could be readily converted into accommodation for visiting clinicians, or even more permanent accommodation for people who are looking to develop careers on the island. The housing pressure still seems to be a structural challenge there. Therefore, although it is welcome that the practitioner vacancies have been filled, the longer-term need to preserve career pathways on the island is important.

Another key point was that the CT scanner at Broadford does not exist. Having a scanner there is an obvious way to reduce ambulance transfers to Raigmore. Could that matter be looked at?

**Neil Gray:** All the matters that Mr Sweeney has raised are being looked at. I understand that the situation with regard to the former Broadford site is being looked at and progressed. That is part of the Government investment to give rural and island communities across Scotland opportunities to take forward innovative ways to provide key worker housing and support, to ensure that we continue to have sustainable island and rural communities.

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** I remind members that I am employed as a bank nurse by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. The hospital at home service in Scotland has been welcomed by

patients who receive hospital-level care in their own homes, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government has committed to expanding it. It is arguably most valuable in rural and island communities, where healthcare facilities might be far away. Will the cabinet secretary set out how patients in those communities are already benefiting and what more we can expect as the service grows?

**Neil Gray:** Clare Haughey is absolutely right about the appreciation among patients and staff for the expansion of the hospital at home service, which has been supported this year by a share of £100 million as part of the 2025-26 budget to reduce waiting times and delayed discharges, thereby shifting the balance of care from acute to community. That funding will support boards with the additional up-front costs associated with the setting up of services and work is well under way to increase hospital at home provision to 2,000 beds by the end of 2026, making it Scotland's biggest hospital and meaning that more people can receive hospital-level care in their own homes.

I have also commissioned Healthcare Improvement Scotland to support integration authorities to adapt hospital at home to rural and island communities. The social impact of hospital at home on those communities can be even greater than on typical urban areas, because it enables people to stay at home and in their own community and to avoid being transported outwith their community and away from family and friends.

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** Although out-of-hours hospital care is vital, most healthcare on Skye is delivered in the community. With GP recruitment and retention across the Highlands in a fragile state, will the Government take action to prevent community services following the same path as Portree hospital by committing to a whole-system approach that will support rural workforce retention, improve access to training and career progression and ensure sustainable primary care for rural communities?

**Neil Gray:** First, I am confident in the service that is being provided at Portree hospital, but we are currently in discussion with the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners about future funding models to ensure that a sustainable general practice model comes forward and includes the recruitment of additional general practitioners in order to improve access.

As I set out in my statement, we have taken steps with rural and island medical provision to ensure that we have foresight on the issues and know what is required in rural and island communities. I have taken a number of steps, including with the Scottish graduate entry

medicine programme—ScotGEM—to recruit more staff into rural and island communities.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Colleagues will remember that I raised this subject at First Minister's question time when there was very nearly a tragic incident on the doorstep of Portree hospital last year. The cabinet secretary says that most of the recommendations made by the independent review have been met, but people on Skye still face the possibility of finding the doors of Portree hospital locked during a moment of crisis and some will still be forced into a two-hour round trip to Broadford. Given the tragic incidents of last year and the continued confusion around urgent care, when will people living on the north end of Skye be able to walk into Portree hospital without first having to phone NHS 24 and with the confidence that qualified staff will be there to treat them?

**Neil Gray:** I am sure that Mr Cole-Hamilton recognises that urgent care services tend not to be drop-in services. He should also be aware that, following the situation last summer, there is now an intercom service at the door of that hospital and that patients will not be turned away.

However, in line with normal security provisions for staff, and as is evident elsewhere, the right process is for patients to contact NHS 24 in the first instance to ensure that their needs can be best met and that they are directed to the best services. That is what is in place in every other part of the country. I recognise the concerns that have been raised with me regarding NHS 24 and the knowledge that its staff have of the local system, and I have reflected back to it my experience as an islander. I understand that, which is why we have been working with NHS Highland and NHS 24 to ensure that the urgent out-of-hours care that is in place for every other part of the community is also provided on Skye.

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** The cabinet secretary referred to the national centre for remote and rural health and care, which was created to help reduce health inequalities and improve the delivery of healthcare services in rural communities. Will he provide an update on the work that is being carried out by that centre and on how that will continue to be supported beyond the end of phase 1 this month?

**Neil Gray:** The national centre was established in 2023 and has four priorities: supporting and developing our rural and island healthcare workforce; building sustainable health and care services; sharing rural primary care knowledge and data; and reducing rural health inequalities. The work that has been completed so far includes a training network for rural primary care practices, funding for five paramedics to undertake the MSc in rural advanced practice, specific training for

dispensing practices and a practitioner-led research award scheme. Funding is in place until April 2026 and NHS Education for Scotland is working closely with officials to establish a plan for the next phase of the centre.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I think that basic healthcare should be the same, regardless of the locality. Emergency care—whether that is accident and emergency care, care to deal with events such as strokes and heart attacks, or maternity care—is required with a level of urgency. Does the minister recognise that, as long as health boards are forced to centralise services to balance budgets, rural communities such as those in the Highlands and Islands will keep having local healthcare pulled away from them, which degrades care and puts lives at risk?

**Neil Gray:** I know that Mr Whittle will not have wanted to do this, but he has conflated urgent care and emergency care. Today, we are talking about urgent care, particularly in the out-of-hours period, and accessibility to that in Portree, which has been maintained. As far as emergency care is concerned, there are very clear pathways to such care in place to support the communities in Skye, and that provision is on-going.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I remind members that, prior to entering Parliament, I was a clinical nurse educator in rural Dumfries and Galloway.

As the cabinet secretary mentioned, multidisciplinary teams can play a pivotal role in bridging gaps in care in rural and island communities. Can he provide any further information on the Government's work to support implementation of such teams?

**Neil Gray:** Emma Harper is absolutely right. We are committed to the development of multidisciplinary teams to help to ensure that people receive the right care at the right time, in general practice and in the community. This year, we are investing more than £190 million in the primary care improvement fund, and we are making strong progress in expanding the multidisciplinary team workforce.

As of March this year, there were more than 5,000 whole-time-equivalent staff in post, who support services including physiotherapy, pharmacotherapy and phlebotomy. That represents an increase of more than 170 whole-time equivalents since last year. Around 3,500 whole-time equivalents have been funded directly by our primary care improvement fund. On my summer tours, I witnessed the incredible flexibility of our rural workforce in ensuring continuity of care for people who require primary and urgent care services.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the statement. Before the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow front-bench members to change over.

## SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18936, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, on the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body-supported bodies landscape review. I invite Ben Macpherson, on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, to speak to and move the motion.

15:22

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** As convener of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, I am pleased to open the debate.

The strategic review was commissioned by the Parliament following the findings of the Finance and Public Administration Committee's inquiry into Scotland's commissioner landscape. The report on that inquiry recommended that a dedicated committee should be established to undertake a strategic review of the bodies that are supported by the SPCB and that it should report by June 2025. Parliament set us that objective and we delivered on it. Today, I am proud to present the unanimous key findings on behalf of the committee. I think that our report is a very good piece of collaborative work that the Parliament can be proud of.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Given that the findings were unanimous and followed on from the unanimous findings of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, does the member agree that it is surprising that the Labour Party has sought to amend the motion to take out our key recommendations?

**Ben Macpherson:** I do, and I urge Parliament not to support the amendment. I will say more about that in due course.

Before I turn to the detail of our deliberations and our conclusions, I want to place on record my sincere thanks to all those who contributed to our review. First, I thank my MSP colleagues from different parties. We worked well—effectively and collegiately—to produce a good piece of work. That was also thanks to our clerks, who supported us well through the process. In addition, I thank all those who gave evidence. Whether in oral evidence or in written submissions, the insights that we received from them were invaluable. Their time and expertise helped us to shape the recommendations that we present to Parliament today.

Over the course of six months, our committee gathered extensive evidence from a wide range of contributors, including current SPCB-supported bodies, academics, researchers, Scottish Government bodies, the Minister for Public Finance and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. Taken as a package, our conclusions and recommendations create a clear strategic framework. They aim to establish a formalised process for assessing future proposals to create new SPCB-supported bodies, to strengthen mechanisms for accountability and scrutiny, to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of shared services and, potentially, to change the remits and powers of some existing bodies—I will say more about that later.

Our committee agreed that, consistent with the conclusions that were reached by the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the existing SPCB-supported bodies play a vital role in safeguarding public trust, institutional integrity and democratic accountability. We heard about how such bodies deliver their core functions and saw in person how their offices are adapted to suit the needs of users. For example, the children's commissioner's office is a bright and welcoming place for children.

Each body was created by the Parliament in response to a perceived need, and collectively they contribute to the strength and health of our democratic landscape. The work that they do matters, and it makes a difference. However, the evidence that we received highlighted the key concern that the existing landscape has developed in an ad hoc manner, with individual bodies having varying functions and powers. That has resulted in a collection of bodies with distinct and, at times, overlapping functions operating under different legislative frameworks.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind):** Ben Macpherson talks about the existing landscape, but does he accept that, for most people, having a standards commission and a commissioner for ethical standards is totally confusing and unnecessary?

**Ben Macpherson:** In some ways, I can see why members and others might look at the distinction between the two bodies critically. However, our committee heard quite good evidence—I refer the member to it—about the benefits of the two bodies being separate and distinct.

When our committee was established, there were proposals for up to five new SPCB-supported bodies with advocacy functions to be created before the end of the parliamentary session. As is set out in the motion for the debate, we are concerned that such expansion

“risks further fragmenting the current landscape, increasing complexity for service users, and placing additional strain on the SPCB and parliamentary committee resources”.

Therefore, I urge Parliament to reject the amendment if it is moved. On the basis of the evidence that we received, our committee was clear in its view—which was unanimous—that the SPCB-supported body landscape should not be expanded to include new advocacy-type bodies. Although we understand the benefit in organisations with a public trust element, such as the Ethical Standards Commissioner and the Scottish Information Commissioner, being SPCB supported, we believe that advocacy bodies, where required, could just as effectively sit within the wider public sector landscape.

We accept that there may be future occasions when the establishment of a new SPCB-supported body is justified, but a clear need must be demonstrated. That is why we have recommended the implementation of two-tier criteria comprising justification and effectiveness tests that must be satisfied before any new proposal can be brought forward. The four justification criteria for establishing new SPCB-supported bodies are:

“Last resort: Alternative models, such as enhanced powers to existing public sector bodies, or statutory duties on ministers must be exhausted and deemed insufficient to address the issue.

Functional gap: There must be clear, evidenced and persistent absence of the proposed body's functional gap across the full Scottish public sector landscape, not just within SPCB supported bodies.

Permanent: The proposed body must address an issue in perpetuity. It cannot be created to deal with an issue that might have arisen due to a short-term failure or perceived failure in public service, or which could be resolved with a fixed-term dedicated piece of work by an existing body.

Independence: The proposed body must require a high degree of operational and perceived independence from the Scottish Government.”

The committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to explore incorporating those criteria into its own ministerial control framework for new public bodies.

I turn now to the governance and accountability of SPCB-supported bodies, which operates in two broad streams. First, the SPCB is responsible for governance and resourcing, including oversight of budgets, staffing and accommodation. Secondly, parliamentary committees are responsible for holding SPCB-supported bodies to account in the exercise of their functions.

Both our review and the review by the Finance and Public Administration Committee identified capacity as a core challenge. The governance and scrutiny of those bodies has been limited not because of a lack of willingness but because of the finite time and resource that are available to

the SPCB and to committees of the Parliament. Our view, therefore, is that solely recommending that the SPCB or parliamentary committees “do more” would not, in itself, bring about the improvements that are required. In that regard, we appreciate, in particular, the amount of legislation that committees have recently had to deal with, and we should all consider that with regard to the next session of Parliament.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** Only yesterday, in passing the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, we brought into existence the role of victims and witnesses commissioner. That bill gives the commissioner a direct power to impose a response to its annual report. Did the committee consider that as a way of ensuring scrutiny?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back for interventions, Mr Macpherson.

**Ben Macpherson:** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I thank Martin Whitfield for a constructive intervention. The committee took into consideration the processes that were put forward in Government bills and in members’ bills. The proposal for the role of victims and witnesses commissioner, which was established through the passing of the bill yesterday, was well advanced when our committee was given its remit, and it was obviously a factor in our considerations. I am happy to follow up on the point that Martin Whitfield has raised later in the debate, if that would be helpful.

Although we acknowledge the adaptability of SPCB members to give effect to the will of the Parliament and put in place oversight mechanisms, we do not believe that that can be sustained without diminishing other core functions of the SPCB. Through reviewing alternative models both in the UK and internationally, we have concluded that a parliamentary committee should be given specific responsibility for the accountability and scrutiny of SPCB-supported bodies for a fixed period as a pilot in session 7.

We do not make that recommendation lightly, and we understand that the existing capacity issues for MSPs and parliamentary committees are significant. However, we firmly believe that a single committee with accountability and scrutiny functions for all the SPCB-supported bodies is absolutely necessary in order to enhance effectiveness and the delivery of outcomes.

In response to our report, the SPCB acknowledged many of the complexities that we identified in making that recommendation. We welcome the SPCB’s positive commitment to work with the parliamentary committee and with officials to explore what would be desirable within the

broader constitutional framework and how that can be achieved.

I thank the Minister for Public Finance and the members of the SPCB for their positive responses to the committee’s conclusions and recommendations. Members will see from the report that we have also recommended a series of targeted improvements that could be made to improve how the SPCB-supported bodies landscape and the wider public sector operate. I will cover that in more detail in concluding the debate.

The committee is confident that our conclusions and recommendations will create a clear strategic framework for the SPCB-supported bodies landscape, and I urge all members to support the committee’s motion unamended.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes and notes the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee’s 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review* (SP Paper 828); recognises the Committee’s conclusions and recommendations, including concerns that expanding the number of SPCB supported bodies risks further fragmenting the current landscape, increasing complexity for service users, and placing additional strain on the SPCB and parliamentary committee resources, and agrees with the Committee’s recommendations that:

(a) the SPCB supported body landscape should not be expanded to include new advocacy-type SPCB supported bodies;

(b) any future proposals for new SPCB supported bodies must satisfy two-tier criteria, as set out in paragraph 150 of the report, comprising both justification and effectiveness tests, and that a parliamentary committee should be given the remit of assessing proposals against these criteria; and

(c) a parliamentary committee should be given the specific responsibility for the accountability and scrutiny of SPCB supported bodies for a fixed period as a pilot exercise in Session 7.

15:33

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** I think that the committee’s report is a must-read for all MSPs. Although we lodged an amendment to the motion, Scottish Labour welcomes and notes the report, and recognises the range of recommendations that have been made on new and existing commissioners; on governance and accountability; on budget and audit issues; and on shared services.

The problem that we have with the motion is that, on the one hand, it says that

“the SPCB supported body landscape should not be expanded to include new advocacy-type SPCB supported bodies”,

but on the other hand, it goes on to state that new bodies should meet the justification and

effectiveness test that is set out in paragraph 150 of the report. The key issue is the justification and effectiveness criteria, which should be used when the relevant parliamentary committee is considering proposals to establish a new commissioner.

I have followed the committee's work both because it addresses the important issue of the growing landscape of commissioners and because, during this parliamentary session, I have been working on my own member's bill, which is focused on accountability; on coherence in public bodies in relation to wellbeing and sustainable development; and on ensuring that the Scottish Government, our councils and the wider public sector are held to account for their impact, both now and in the future. In his speech earlier today, John Swinney referenced George Reid's call for a sense of purpose, because "Today is tomorrow."

Last year, I secured a debate to recognise the United Nations declaration on future generations. I argued that one of the most important things that we can do is to think about how we build a society in which people's wellbeing and sustainable development are built into the actions of, and the policy and spending decisions made by, all our Government and public sector bodies in Scotland. To deliver on those principles, we need clear guidance, accountability and a focus on ensuring that they are not just warm words but actually delivered. Hence, I propose that there should be a commissioner with investigatory powers.

The report that we are debating references proposals for new commissioners and describes them as "advocacy" commissioners. I do not agree with that in relation to my proposed commissioner, and I was clear about that in my evidence to the committee. As Martin Whitfield acknowledged, yesterday, the Parliament established a new victims and witnesses commissioner—that, too, is listed as an advocacy commissioner. There have been questions about whether the powers of that new commissioner are actually sufficient.

I am glad that the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee acknowledges the positive contribution that has been made by existing commissioners and that they

"fulfil a vital function in safeguarding public trust, institutional integrity and democratic accountability".

Although the report notes some overlap between them, the evidence was that

"each of the existing SPCB supported bodies provides a unique and necessary contribution."

**John Mason:** Will the member give way?

**Sarah Boyack:** I will not because I am very tight for time—perhaps, if I have time later, I will.

The recommendations on induction and training in the next session of the Parliament are important because all the new MSPs and their staff will need to be aware of the work and remits of existing SPCB-supported bodies. Maybe we should send today's *Official Report* to all our current colleagues too, because we have to get them interested in this.

The report makes an important recommendation that

"a parliamentary committee is given the specific responsibility for the accountability and scrutiny of SPCB supported bodies for a fixed period as a pilot exercise"

in session 7.

That will be an additional commitment in the already overstretched capacity of the SPCB and parliamentary committees, but it is clear that this is an on-going issue that is not going away. Delivering parliamentary accountability is critical to the effectiveness of how we work as a democracy.

The pilot scheme that is referenced in the motion must have clear metrics. What does accountability mean? How will we judge the effectiveness of scrutiny? What timescale will there be for feedback to the Parliament and for public reporting? It is critical that the Parliament hears the voices of service users, children, young people, marginalised individuals and those who are most affected by failures of oversight but who are not regularly enabled to be consulted. The pilot needs to be geographically inclusive, too.

In the criteria for establishing new bodies, making the most efficient use of resources is key. That is why I support the hub-and-spoke model and using existing public sector office space to make sure that we get the effectiveness that is needed. That aligns well with the work that I have been doing on my member's bill on wellbeing and sustainable development.

The report makes an important and timely contribution to on-going efforts to make sure that our public sector operates with greater coherence, transparency and long-term accountability. We need to avoid duplication—that was an issue that I looked at in my bill and spoke to the Auditor General about. Clarity of roles is key, and a memorandum of understanding is a good way to avoid overlap—there is work that we could do in that regard.

I urge the Parliament to agree to our Scottish Labour amendment and to proceed with the recommendations on the pilot oversight committee in the next session, with clear metrics for that committee and the resources that are necessary to make it a success. Let us seize the moment, not only to tidy up structures but to make institutions and decision making fit for the future, transparent, effective and trusted.

I move amendment S6M-18936.1, to leave out from “, and agrees” to end.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Boyack. I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand, so I imagine that members will be able to get the time back for any interventions. I call Maggie Chapman to speak on behalf of the SPCB.

15:39

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am speaking today as a member of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. I begin by thanking the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee for undertaking the inquiry. That work, alongside the inquiry that was undertaken by the Finance and Public Administration Committee have, understandably, been unsettling for the current office-holders, and the SPCB appreciates the acknowledgement of that in the report. We also welcome the recognition in the report that the bodies that are currently supported by the SPCB carry out vital functions.

The corporate body notes the committee's conclusions relating to advocacy-type SPCB-supported bodies. I have mentioned this in a previous debate, but I want to be clear that the SPCB does not take a view on whether a new office-holder should be established. That is rightly for the Parliament to determine.

The SPCB has a statutory duty to support independent office-holders. That duty has become increasingly time consuming since 2003, during which time the number of office-holders has increased from two to eight. The mention of proposals for up to six additional new office-holders has, understandably, caused the corporate body concern, which we have raised with the Scottish ministers and the Finance and Public Administration Committee. The corporate body therefore welcomes the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee's work and the overall approach to create a clear strategic framework.

We welcome the acknowledgement that additional office-holders would have an impact on the corporate body and other parliamentary resources. The role of the SPCB extends far beyond agreeing annual funding for the office-holders, and additional office-holders would affect our workload, our overall budget and the workload of the officials in office-holder services.

**Martin Whitfield:** Is the SPCB concerned that, if a new committee is created to, in effect, apply the two tests for a new commissioner, the SPCB would be required to give evidence to that

committee as to the impact? Is the SPCB comfortable with doing that?

**Maggie Chapman:** I will come on to say more about the potential new committee in a moment. The corporate body wants to ensure that the office-holder landscape is coherent and strategic. At the moment, we are clear that it is not. If the new committee establishes that coherence and a strategic approach, we would be very willing to work with it.

**Ben Macpherson:** As a point of clarity, it is worth emphasising that the committee's recommendation was not necessarily that a new committee be established. That was a potential option, but an existing committee could take on the task of assessing SPCB-supported bodies. It is important to acknowledge that.

**Maggie Chapman:** Yes, that is understood, and that is why I couched my comments in such a way as to refer to what would happen should that committee be established. However, even if it is not established and the responsibilities lie elsewhere, the corporate body will obviously work with the relevant committee to ensure that the process works as smoothly as it can.

I turn to specific recommendations in the committee's report, starting with the new set of criteria that the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee developed. The corporate body is very supportive of the set of criteria and the strong message that it sends on shared services. Should the Parliament endorse that recommendation and the recommendations relating to the inclusion of the criteria in parliamentary guidance on bills and a standing order determination, officials will be asked to bring forward proposals on how the recommendations can be implemented.

The corporate body notes the recommendations relating to existing SPCB-supported bodies. Again, should those recommendations be endorsed by the Parliament, we will work with relevant office-holders and the Scottish Government, as appropriate, to implement them. As the committee acknowledges, those proposals will require additional resources, which will be an important consideration, given the wider public finance context.

To ensure that we undertake our role properly, we have put a number of governance arrangements in place, but we note the deficiencies that have been identified by both the Finance and Public Administration Committee and the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee in the governance and accountability of corporate body-supported bodies. Additional work in that area would require the SPCB's approach to all its work to be reviewed to ensure that we have

fulfilled all our responsibilities, but we will, of course, always give effect to the will of the Parliament.

I want to speak directly to the recommendations at paragraphs 158 to 161, on giving a parliamentary committee

“the specific responsibility for the accountability and scrutiny of SPCB supported bodies”.

To be clear, I note that the establishment of committees and their remits is not a matter for the corporate body. Furthermore, the SPCB is aware of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee’s inquiry into committee effectiveness, which includes consideration of the changes that can be made to strengthen the ability of committees to undertake scrutiny work across a range of policy areas. The corporate body is conscious that there are several pressures in the system and that a new committee structure for session 7 will need to balance those demands alongside capacity constraints, including in member and Scottish parliamentary service resources.

The corporate body is also mindful that its statutory functions, duties and responsibilities are set out within the broader constitutional landscape. Should the recommendation at paragraph 160 be endorsed by the Parliament, the SPCB will commit to collaborating on whether the delegation or transfer of SPCB functions would be desirable within the framework and, if so, how that can be achieved. As the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee acknowledges, that will require legislative change, given that various acts mention the corporate body specifically in relation to a range of functions. We will therefore ask officials to undertake a mapping exercise prior to session 7 to clearly set out functions for each body, the statutory basis for those functions and what the options for change would look like. If the recommendation at paragraph 161 is endorsed, we will commit to exploring how to improve operational oversight of office-holders in the context of the session 7 committee structure.

I will comment briefly on the amendment, but only to say that, as ever, the SPCB will seek to implement the will of Parliament. Parliament should be clear that, if the amendment is agreed to, there will not be a basis for the SPCB to take the steps that I have outlined above. I repeat that it is for Parliament to take the decision, but it is important that Parliament is clear on the implications of that decision.

Before I move on to the subject of shared services, I will briefly comment on the budget and audit recommendations. I highlight the on-going review of the public audit model by the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission, and I note

that the corporate body will engage with that review. I also highlight the corporate body’s agreement with the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee’s view that

“medium to long-term financial planning is not hindered by an annual budget and funding cycle”.

I move on to the recommendations that relate to shared services. The corporate body welcomes the acknowledgement of the improvements in that area. Five office-holders are now co-located at Bridgeside house, with the Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland having taken up post on 1 September. That co-location has resulted in further accommodation savings. The corporate body welcomes the recommendation relating to a hub-and-spoke model and will work with office-holders to implement it as opportunities to do so arise. In related work, the corporate body recently established an accommodation audit in relation to office-holders and, through that process, is looking at the use of the wider public sector estate. As such, we welcome the recommendation in that area.

I conclude by thanking all the office-holders again for their dedicated work, and I thank the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, too, for its report.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** I call Kenneth Gibson to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

15:48

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** I am delighted to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. As members know, the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee was established by the Parliament in response to the FPA Committee’s “Report on Scotland’s Commissioner Landscape: A Strategic Approach”, which was published on 16 September last year.

One year on, we see the culmination of a comprehensive piece of work by the two committees, and I pay tribute to Ben Macpherson and his team for completing the report by June this year, as requested by the FPA Committee. My colleagues and our excellent clerking team, roared on by the SPCB, put in a huge amount of work in preparing our initial report, and I thank them for that. I am confident that our work will bring real and substantive change in creating a more strategic and coherent commissioner landscape that is fit for the future.

I will revisit some of the concerns that prompted our inquiry back in December 2023 and comment on how we approached our work and arrived at our findings. I will also reflect on the review

committee's report, which the FPA Committee unanimously endorses.

Our inquiry followed concerns that a growing number of proposals to create advocacy or rights-based commissioners could lead to the SPCB-supported body landscape almost doubling in size by the end of the current session of Parliament. That would have significant implications for the SPCB and the overall Scottish Parliament budget. The committee wanted to establish the extent to which a more coherent and strategic approach to creating and developing SPCB-supported bodies was needed and, if it was needed, how that might be achieved. We therefore sought to establish how the model was working in practice and the drivers for the increased number of proposals to create new commissioners. Possible alternative models were also considered, as was the case for a review.

We found that experiences of and frustration with public service delivery failures are reasons given for supporting the establishment of new advocacy or rights-based SPCB-supported bodies. Others felt the need for a champion to represent particular groups in society who might feel overlooked. There was strong evidence of overlap between and duplication of commissioners' work in the wider public sector, and accountability and scrutiny mechanisms were found to be wanting.

Interestingly, in evidence to the committee, former Labour MSP David Stewart and former Scottish National Party MSP Alex Neil both said that, having pursued the establishment of commissioners during the previous session of Parliament, they no longer considered that to be the best way forward. The FPA Committee therefore unanimously concluded that it was time to pause and take stock before any new bodies were added to an already complex and disjointed landscape.

We asked the Parliament to agree to a root-and-branch review being carried out by a dedicated committee similar to the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee, which was set up in 2008. The purpose of the review was to design a clear strategic framework to underpin the landscape and provide more coherence and structure to it. It would also aim to enable more effective accountability and scrutiny mechanisms to improve delivery outcomes and value for money.

We are grateful to the Parliament for establishing the review committee and for agreeing to a moratorium on the creation of new SPCB-supported bodies or the expansion of the remits of existing bodies while the review was under way. The FPA Committee is pleased that the review committee built on the evidence that we received, with its report echoing many of our

findings. It is also important that, in doing so, it met the ambitious reporting timescale of June this year, showing us all—including the Government—that it is possible to produce excellent work by set deadlines.

We share the review committee's key finding that the SPCB-supported body landscape should not be expanded to include new advocacy-type commissioners. Indeed, the FPA Committee's report concluded that that trend is not sustainable and that

“this advocacy role is for MSPs to undertake, with Parliament holding Government to account on how it seeks to improve the lives of specific groups of society or develop and deliver effective policy, with the third sector continuing to play a crucial role.”

Our report went on to state:

“We also believe that the funding for new supported bodies would be better spent on improving the delivery of public services 'on the ground', where greater impact can be made.”

The FPA Committee agrees with the recommendations to enhance and formalise criteria for creating new SPCB-supported bodies, including that that must happen only as a last resort when all other models and approaches have been exhausted.

We also agree that a parliamentary committee should be given specific responsibility for the accountability and scrutiny of SPCB-supported bodies for a fixed period of time, as a pilot exercise. That is a sound suggestion. It is clear that the current model of governance and scrutiny is not working, so it is time to try something new in the next session.

As the committee that is responsible for public service reform, we share the review committee's view that SPCB-supported bodies could and should do more to adopt a more proactive and preventative approach. We whole-heartedly agree that such an approach would not only enhance the effectiveness of the bodies but help to avoid failures in public service delivery and complaints being made in the first place.

Many of the recommendations, such as the sharing of services and offices, could easily apply to the wider public sector. We therefore welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to carry out, as part of its reform programme, a strategic mapping exercise to identify the functions of all Scottish public bodies and where those functions overlap. The review committee rightly pointed out that that would be helpful in informing decisions on future size, structure, and coherence across the public sector.

Given the unanimity of both committees, the Labour amendment is deeply disappointing. Some months ago, Martin Whitfield circulated a paper

calling for parliamentary committees to be respected and strengthened, but now he calls on the Parliament to ignore—no doubt for cynical reasons of internal party management—the unanimous view of two committees following two years of hard work. That is shameful.

**Martin Whitfield:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Kenneth Gibson:** I am happy to take an intervention from the defender of the committee structures.

**Martin Whitfield:** I have great respect for Kenneth Gibson, but I find his comment about an amendment to a motion—albeit on the back of a committee debate, which was occasioned by a departure, in this session of Parliament, from the usual standards for committee motions—a tad disappointing. I am saddened by it. If we are not prepared to debate, analyse and discuss the extent to which we wish to bind a future Parliament, we do both this chamber and the future chamber a disservice. In my speech, I will welcome all the contributions that we have heard today—I apologise for the length of this intervention, Presiding Officer—and I am more than happy to respond to and debate the points that have been made. I am more than happy to do that with Mr Gibson.

**Kenneth Gibson:** That is desperate stuff. Let us be honest: if the member's colleague who is sat next to him, Sarah Boyack, did not have a proposal to create a commissioner, I doubt that we would be having this debate. Labour colleagues on the FPA Committee and the review committee supported the decisions unanimously. In days gone by, some MSPs might have looked to have a bill in their name as their legacy; now, they appear to want a commissioner. We must see the bigger picture.

The FPA Committee thanks the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee for carrying out its important work and encourages all members to support the motion at decision time.

15:55

**The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee):** I welcome the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee's report and recommendations on how the SPCB-supported bodies landscape can be improved. It is a long title, but it is an important topic, and I will talk about the wider context in relation to the Government's wider public service reform agenda.

I was pleased to give evidence to the committee earlier this year and, in my written response on 9 September, I set out the Government's position on

the committee's report. I will reiterate that today and offer any clarification that is required. I thank everyone for their work and contributions to the committee's report.

At the heart of the report is a desire for the efficient delivery of public services, which very much aligns with the Government's public service reform ambitions. I recognise the committee's interest in reform of the public bodies landscape, and the Government accepts the committee's recommendation that the Scottish Government undertakes a strategic mapping exercise to identify the functions of all Scottish public bodies—not just those that the SPCB supports—and where they overlap. I am pleased to confirm to the committee and the Parliament that that work is already under way and will be completed as part of workstream 4 of the public service reform strategy, which I published on 19 June this year.

That strategy identifies how public bodies can deliver services more efficiently and effectively, building on the principles set out in the Christie commission on the future delivery of public services. The review of public body functions will address the committee's recommendations and inform decisions on future size, structure and coherence across the wider public sector.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** For clarity, and bearing in mind Kenny Gibson's comment about how a deadline helps to get things delivered, when is the deadline for that work to be completed?

**Ivan McKee:** Stephen Kerr is absolutely right. He should be aware that there are 18 workstreams across the PSR strategy, and we have spent the summer putting together the teams that will lead each of those workstreams. The action plan for workstream 4, along with the other 17 action plans, will be published shortly, so that members can see the deadlines for that work.

Reforming Scotland's public services is vital to ensuring that people experience high-quality services that are focused on those who need them most. However, Government involvement in reviewing the parliamentary commissioner landscape is, by its nature, constrained and, at times, inappropriate, due to the nature of the services that those bodies deliver and their independence from Government. I appreciate that the committee's review was born out of concerns about an expanding commissioner landscape and what that could mean for public finance and effective service delivery. SPCB-supported office-holders budgeted £18.3 million for the year 2024-25, and that figure is set to rise following the introduction of the new Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland. That needs to be set in the wider context of about a £5 billion corporate

spend across the Scottish public body and Scottish Government landscape.

**John Mason:** I take the minister's point—he has said it before, and he is absolutely right—that that is a relatively small amount of money in the scheme of things. However, does he accept that, if we can control the number of commissioners, that sends a signal that we can perhaps control the number of other public bodies?

**Ivan McKee:** John Mason makes that point very well. I acknowledged at the start of my contribution that the debate has much wider significance across the public service reform agenda. The importance of delivering on this—albeit small—part of it is that it sends a strong signal regarding the wider landscape.

On public bodies more widely, the Scottish Government's PSR programme is focused on driving a culture of continuous improvement to support efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of public services. I am delighted that the committee's recommendations align with those intentions.

I am particularly pleased about the committee's recommended criteria for the establishment of any new SPCB-supported bodies. As the Parliament is aware, any Scottish Government proposal to establish a new body must strictly follow the ministerial control framework, which, if a public body is deemed to be necessary, ensures a rigorous best value process. Only after all alternative delivery options have been explored is such a body created.

Where that concerns the potential creation of a new SPCB-supported body, the ministerial control framework guidance stresses that the merits of such a body must be discussed with the chief executive of the SPCB's office at the earliest opportunity. The committee's proposed two-tier justification criteria for the establishment of SPCB-supported bodies reflect the terms of the control framework, and my officials will look to update that framework in line with the committee's recommendations, should the Parliament accept them this afternoon.

I recognise the committee's recommendation that no new advocacy-type bodies be established. We agree with that general principle, as I have set out in my written response to the committee. As the committee heard during evidence sessions, advocacy-type roles in other instances might be more appropriate for MSPs, the Government or other public sector organisations to fulfil. I also set out in my written response that Government officials remain on hand to support any future reform of the SPCB-supported public body landscape, if that is appropriate.

On matters concerning the powers and remit of the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, I highlight that the Scottish Government recently published a discussion paper that sets out proposals relating to a human rights bill. The paper sets out a range of options for the SHRC and the SPSO that are intended to strengthen their ability to provide accountability and support for human rights in Scotland.

**Martin Whitfield:** With regard to the concept of a human rights commissioner, will the Scottish Government follow the process that it has taken with the victims and witnesses commissioner and build into the legislation the requirement to respond to that individual, with regard not only to their annual report but to other evidence that they need?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, in responding, please bring your remarks to a close.

**Ivan McKee:** We will take that into account as we move forward.

Government officials will continue to engage on the bill proposals, and I offer my reassurance to the Parliament that they will be available for discussion on further reform.

I turn briefly to the issue of shared services. The single Scottish estate programme, which is part of the wider public service reform umbrella, is well under way. The programme has already reduced the size, cost and emissions of the public sector estate. Overall, a total of £41 million of benefits has already been secured, so we are well on our way to achieving the initial target of £50 million to £80 million of benefit.

I am happy to discuss any of those issues further, and I look forward to hearing what others have to say during the debate.

16:02

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, both as a member of the committee and on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

I echo what the convener had to say in his thanks to the excellent team of committee clerks who supported us and the Scottish Parliament information centre researchers who helped our work. I also thank everyone who gave evidence in what was a relatively short and focused inquiry.

I pay tribute to the convener, Ben Macpherson, for stewarding us so well throughout the process, and to my fellow committee members. It was a small committee of just five MSPs, all from different parties. I believe that we worked together very well, with very little disagreement.

When the Parliament is considering its future make-up and approach to committees, we should reflect on how successful that small committee has been and the good use that it has been able to make of the time available. Perhaps that is a model that we should consider in the Parliament for the future. We were able to reach unanimous conclusions in the report, based on the evidence that we had all heard.

On that point on being unanimous, I say gently to Martin Whitfield that we had on our committee a Labour member, Richard Leonard, who is with us today, who agreed with all our conclusions. In the Finance and Public Administration Committee, whose report our work followed on from, we reached equally unanimous conclusions, also with a Labour member on the committee. I am a bit surprised and disappointed that, today, the Labour Party does not seem to be agreeing to the conclusions to which its members on both those committees were prepared to sign up.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am very grateful to Murdo Fraser for taking an intervention. At a higher level, I would say that we could disband the chamber if we got only unanimity on committees, but I am not particularly attracted by that idea, nor would he be. There is an obligation to debate, to express views and to investigate proposals. My amendment, on behalf of Scottish Labour, intends to do that, because of concerns that I have about the wording of the motion.

**Murdo Fraser:** I look forward to hearing the contributions from Mr Whitfield and his colleagues. We will see whether Mr Leonard has changed his mind since he sat on the committee. Mr Leonard is shaking his head. It is clear that Labour representatives on not just one but two parliamentary committees were happy to sign up to the recommendations. Clearly, Labour has had a rethink. No doubt that will be explained.

As we have been told by the convener, the committee was established following a recommendation by the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which had already raised concerns about the number of proposals that were coming forward to create new commissioner bodies. The committee concluded that

“continuing the trend for creating new advocacy-type SPCB supported bodies is not sustainable”

and it sought a new structure and set of guidelines. That was the task that our committee was given to consider.

It was very much at the front of our minds when we started to consider the issues that there are different types of commissioners. Some provide a primarily regulatory function, such as the Ethical Standards Commissioner, the SPSO or the

Scottish Information Commissioner. Others perform primarily advocacy roles, such as the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People, although that commissioner also has regulatory functions.

The committee’s general view was that there is, of course, a place for commissioners that deal primarily with regulation, although we considered whether there might be some consolidation of those roles. On consideration, we did not see significant opportunities in that space. We also acknowledged that there might be a need for new commissioners in the future to deal with the regulation of matters that we cannot foresee. For example, the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner was a relatively new office that would not have been contemplated when the Parliament was formed, because the matters that it considers were not regarded as significant at that point. However, the committee had to draw a distinction between commissioners that perform regulatory functions and those being proposed purely, or mainly, to perform an advocacy role.

We were entirely sympathetic to members, some of whom are in the chamber for the debate, who have lodged members’ bills to create new commissioners to perform an advocacy role. That reflects perceived failures in the delivery of public services for particular groups. The question that the committee had to wrestle with is whether introducing such new commissioners, with all the expense of setting them up, would be the best way to address those gaps in provision.

Scotland is not an undergoverned country. We have 129 MSPs, 56 MPs, 32 local authorities, more than 1,000 local councillors, and a plethora of public organisations from health boards to quangos. If there are failures in the delivery of public services, to my mind, the answer is not to create yet another set of public appointees to try to address the problem. Surely the answer is to try to address the problem at source, and to better enable all the people who are currently paid to, and are in a position to, solve those problems and ensure that individuals are getting a fair deal.

The committee came to the conclusion that, although the calls for the creation of new advocacy commissioners are understandable, they do not represent good value for the public purse. Although it was not our primary consideration, public expenditure is important, because commissioners cost money. There is a risk of mission creep—that, once a commissioner has been established, it will seek to expand its functions and offices and demand more and more cash—which we need to be conscious of in times when public finances are constrained.

I was struck by the Minister for Public Finance’s evidence to the committee. I asked him what he

regards as having the most impact: a report from a commissioner, a report from a cross-party committee of the Parliament, or a report from an external body. If I remember rightly, he answered that they were all one voice among others. The impact of a commissioner's report is no more significant than that of a parliamentary committee. That was a significant piece of evidence.

I know that the committee's conclusions will be a disappointment to those outwith the Parliament who are campaigning for new commissioners and to some MSPs, but resources are finite, and, if we accept the case for new advocacy commissioners, we must acknowledge that people could argue for an almost limitless number of new commissioners to be appointed.

When we took evidence from Jeremy Balfour, who is not with us today, on his proposal for a new commissioner for the disabled, he said that he accepted that argument, but he asked why we should pull up the drawbridge now. With all due respect to Mr Balfour, I think that that rather misses the point, because we do not have any pure advocacy commissioners right now, apart, possibly, from the Children and Young People's Commissioner, and we could argue that children are in a different category to others, because they do not have votes and, therefore, do not have the direct voice in the democratic process that other groups have.

It was for those reasons that we came to the conclusions that we did in relation to the creation of new commissioners. I do not have time to cover all the other points that we discussed around the need for improved accountability and scrutiny of existing commissioners and the need for a dedicated committee—not necessarily a stand-alone committee—of this Parliament to scrutinise the work of commissioners. That is all covered in our detailed report. I commend it to members, and I also commend the convener's motion, which I am pleased to support.

16:10

**Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green):** It was a privilege to be a member of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, and I thank the convener and our excellent clerking and research team for their work. It was a genuinely interesting and productive committee. Over the course of several months, we were able to take a great deal of evidence and dig into the issues raised in some depth. We compared what we do in Scotland with how other countries manage those bodies that are responsible for maintaining trust in public life. I support the convener's motion, and I commend the paper to members.

Among the things that the committee explored were the reasons behind the sudden expansion and proposed expansion of the SPCB-supported bodies, in particular the requests for advocacy commissioners. We found that there were three reasons for that.

First, commissioners were and are being requested in response to perceived failings in public services, and creating a commissioner is a tangible and visible action that can be taken.

Secondly, there is both the political kudos that a member may achieve by campaigning for and achieving the creation of a commissioner and the political difficulty caused to other politicians who might vote or speak against something that we all want, such as better public services for disadvantaged people, victims, patients and so on.

Thirdly, there has been a lack of attention and adherence to existing guidelines on the creation of new SPCB-supported bodies and commissioners. Those guidelines have existed for a while, but the Government and members proposing bills have ignored them.

It is understandable that, when there is a perceived failure in public services, we want to see something being done to address that failure and prevent it in the future, but is a new commissioner the right answer? The committee heard that commissioners have no sway or influence on Government greater than that which members of Parliament or third sector organisations have. When we asked a colleague from New Zealand about who held their Government to account and advocated for the needs of disabled people, victims of crime, patients and so on, the answer was that they expect members of Parliament to do that. We also heard concerns in our evidence that putting in place commissioners might be letting the Government off the hook.

**Sarah Boyack:** We have fantastic advocacy groups, such as Stop Climate Chaos, which was lobbying us all today. Is it those groups or individual MSPs that the member thinks should be carrying out work around guidance and investigations into the Government, individual local authorities or the 131 public sector bodies?

**Lorna Slater:** I understand the point that the member is making, which is that resources need to be put into investigations and guidance. However, there is a whole civil service for that. It is up to us to push the Government to do those things, because the evidence is that, whether it is parliamentarians, third-sector organisations or commissioners who are pushing for such work to get done, it will not get done unless the Government takes it up.

The issue is about being effective. There is no evidence that commissioners have any more sway

than anyone else, because we can see commissioners creating report after report and then getting ignored, in the same way that parliamentarians sometimes get ignored when we ask for specific actions—for example, on climate.

Creating more commissioners who are just going to be ignored by Government is not a solution at all. Creating a commissioner can be a substitute for real action and a way for the Government to say that it is taking a matter seriously while being able to distance itself from delivery and delay action by waiting for the commissioner to report or suggest something.

My colleague Maggie Chapman proposed an excellent alternative for dealing with failures when they arise: instead of having stand-alone commissioners, there could be focused periods of work to address the issue. She said:

“If we ask whether a dedicated piece of work should be done in the next five years by a body within the Scottish Human Rights Commission, that essentially creates a sunset clause.”—[*Official Report, SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee*, 15 May 2025; c 23.]

That would be a mechanism to bring resources and attention to a specific area of concern without creating a whole new public body of questionable effectiveness that would last in perpetuity.

The systems that we set up to support trust in public services and organisations should be designed to be proactive in finding problems and failures before they become serious; systems should not just react when things have gone wrong. We heard from the ombudsman about the limitations to their remit that prevent them from undertaking proactive investigations that might prevent public service failures before they happen. There are proposals and recommendations on the record already about how the ombudsman’s remit could be expanded, and that should be considered seriously.

There was agreement among the committee that the landscape of SPCB-supported bodies and Scottish public bodies in general is messy. There are both gaps and overlaps in what organisations do and are responsible for. The whole landscape would benefit from analysis and wider reconsideration to ensure that there is an effective network of public bodies to support advocacy and public trust without duplication or undermining of the excellent work of third sector organisations that already do that work. It might be that the remit of an existing body can be adjusted or that bodies can be consolidated.

In the extraordinary case that a new body that is intended to last in perpetuity is to be created, it should absolutely be done following strict criteria, including that the proposed work cannot be done

by anyone else with or without a change of remit to an existing body.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate, with back-bench speeches of up to five minutes.

16:16

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** I thank the committee for its work on this important topic and for its comprehensive and detailed report. The on-going requests from organisations, individuals and members’ bills seeking to significantly increase the number of commissioners and, thereby, SPCB-supported bodies, has caused me great concern, so I could not agree more with the report’s conclusions that any future proposals for new bodies and roles must satisfy the two-tier criteria of justification and effectiveness tests.

The landscape is already complex, as we have heard from other members. Many people are unclear about the remits of the SPCB-supported bodies; how they can access and use their services; and what, if any, support the bodies can offer individuals. I welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to a strategic mapping exercise to identify the functions of all Scottish public bodies and any overlap to fully inform decisions on future size, structure and coherence.

In my role as convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I was recently involved in the recruitment process to appoint the first Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland, which is a role that was approved by the Parliament in the week of the Cumberlege report. Among other functions that are attached to their role, they have powers to investigate healthcare safety issues, to amplify patients’ voices, to report on safety issues and to make recommendations for how those should be addressed. The newly appointed commissioner will play a vital role as an independent public advocate for us all as national health service patients.

Just yesterday, I was pleased to vote at stage 3 of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill in support of the establishment of a victims and witnesses commissioner. If the Parliament accepts the committee’s recommendations that we are discussing in the debate, those recommendations would of course be adhered to in the establishment of that post. Of particular relevance are the recommendations on the requirements for a clear functional need for any role and a clearly defined remit. As we know, the establishment of the victims and witnesses commissioner has strong stakeholder support, particularly for their ability to hold the Scottish Government and criminal justice bodies to account.

The creation of the victims and witnesses commissioner responds directly to calls for change from victims and bereaved families. That is a key point, which I have reflected on in the light of the appointment of the new Patient Safety Commissioner. We will all have raised concerns on behalf of constituents about healthcare issues, and the new commissioner will play a vital role in advocating for systematic improvement in safety. However, I wonder how much the public currently know about the new commissioner's remit. Specifically, a shared understanding needs to be developed that the Patient Safety Commissioner will not undertake casework, complaints or advocacy on behalf of individuals or families.

I am sure that this new commissioner's office, as it beds in, will have opportunities for public engagement and to raise awareness about the bounds of its remit. However, that is an example of how increasing the number of SPCB-supported bodies risks causing confusion and unnecessary complexity for people who are often experiencing a very difficult time in their lives and are seeking help, support and redress.

With that in mind, I particularly welcome the recommendations in paragraph 150 of the committee's report on the need for simplicity and accessibility. It states:

"The body's purpose must be easily understandable to the public. If it has a public-facing role, it must also be designed to ensure"

digital and physical accessibility so that people

"who require its services or support can engage with it promptly, effectively, and without unnecessary barriers."

Finally, I welcome the committee's recommendations that, in the next parliamentary session, there should be a committee with specific responsibility for scrutinising SPCB-supported bodies. We all know how busy our existing committees are and the level of demand that is placed on committee time with legislation, budget scrutiny and other inquiries. A dedicated committee with a remit to hold those bodies to account and to scrutinise their effectiveness or otherwise would have the time and scope to look in detail at the work that they do.

SPCB-supported bodies come at a significant cost to the public purse, and we must be confident that their existence is justifiable, offers value for money and is effectively improving lives and people's experiences of services.

I thank the committee and its clerks for their work on the issue and commend their report. I hope that the committee's recommendations will gain cross-party support.

16:21

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** I put on record that Liz Smith was very much hoping to take part in the debate this afternoon. I hope that I can do some of her comments justice.

I very much welcome the report and the engagement with MSPs on the part of Ben Macpherson and his colleagues. I am pleased to note that there is a common theme in the findings of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee and those of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which is an important reflection of where we are. I remember giving evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee during its inquiry when I was the convener of the Education, Children and Young People's Committee.

The most important thing about the entire debate is the context in which it is taking place. We need to recognise that the current structures have evolved over time and on an ad hoc basis rather than through any coherent structure, which has clearly led to the questions that we face on sustainability. There are significant financial pressures on public finances.

There are then the concerns about the delivery of some of the public services—that has been seen as deficient, and we have heard about that today—and about the Scottish Government's delay and confusion in setting out exactly what parameters will drive much-needed public sector reform and on what basis the Government will be measured in delivering better public services.

All that context was important to enable the Finance and Public Administration Committee to understand better what was driving the substantial increase in the number of proposals to create new SPCB-supported bodies, following a period of relative stability in the commissioner landscape. As Mr Macpherson's committee acknowledges, as did Mr Gibson's committee, the evidence is clear that the current model is no longer fit for purpose, as it lacks clarity and coherence, sufficient accountability and transparency over budget setting. That combination produces a cocktail that is bad for stakeholders and bad for the reputation of the Parliament.

However, as well as setting out that recognition, the committee was clear that we need to look at the advocacy type of commissioner, for which demand is increasing. I agreed with the Scottish Information Commissioner when he said that

"a lot of the desire for future commissioners is a bellwether to the lack of trust and confidence in a lot of public services."—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 30 April 2024; c 16.]

Age Scotland commented that the SPCB-supported body model is

“an established way of getting more effective action on particular issues”,—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee, 7 May 2024; c 3.*]

especially as the model provides for more independence. In other words, it implies that the best route might not always be via ministers, but it is clear that the current model is deficient when solving the problem and that the Government finds it far too easy to pass the buck for those failures. I do not say this lightly, but on some matters today, I agree whole-heartedly with my colleague Lorna Slater.

On more than one occasion, committee members felt compelled to ask witnesses how convenient it was for the Government to think, when problems arose, that the matter could be dealt with by a commissioner rather than by a minister. Would it not be better to target money at the public service that is failing, rather than at the commissioner process?

The committee’s report says that it found too much duplication in the system and too little public awareness about the role that each commissioner plays. Some commissioners also told the committee that they did not really feel accountable because they were seldom, if ever, called before a committee to give evidence. That cannot be right.

**Ben Macpherson:** Ms Webber was previously the convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Would she agree with me that, due to the amount of legislation and other demands, it is quite difficult for committees to make space to carry out such scrutiny?

**Sue Webber:** I agree. As convener of that committee, I was fortunate that we had only one commissioner reporting to us, making it easier to programme that in. I know that having many commissioners would make that even harder to do. As I said, the lack of accountability cannot be right and is just another reason why the current landscape is not working well.

There has been much food for thought throughout this welcome debate, including about how well Parliament operates when disbursing public money. In order for us to take stock and think carefully about the way forward so that we can provide a more coherent and effective structure, we want a dedicated, short-term committee examining the options and a moratorium being put in place on any new commissioners while it does so.

Again, I thank Mr Macpherson and his committee for their work.

16:26

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** I am pleased to speak in this

debate as convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. I preface my remarks by saying that they come from my own perspective, while drawing on the work of that committee.

I pay tribute to the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee for its detailed scrutiny, which was a really important and worthwhile piece of work. I also pay tribute to the Finance and Public Administration Committee for its diligent work on this area. I gave evidence to that committee during its review of the supported bodies landscape.

It is right that we review not only the number of commissioners but other important factors such as cost, functions, shared services, governance and effectiveness. I note that the review committee’s report outlines the anticipated drivers that have led to the proliferation of supported bodies in place today. I agree with the direction of travel in relation to new commissioners and with the recommendation that a strategic mapping exercise should be undertaken to look at functions, areas of overlap and what the supported bodies landscape should look like in future.

That said, I consider Parliament’s decision yesterday to create a new victims and witnesses commissioner to be the right one. When the Criminal Justice Committee considered that part of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, we heard concerns that the cost of a new commissioner could be put to better use elsewhere and questions about whether an existing commissioner might be able to take on the role. One witness told us that they would rather fund legal representation for survivors than a commissioner.

We considered whether a commissioner would interfere with the ability of third sector organisations to engage directly with the Scottish Government and other justice bodies where strong relationships already exist. However, on balance, we supported the establishment of a commissioner, while caveating that with the recommendation that the post should be time limited, to allow for its effectiveness to be reviewed.

I also point out that, at the time of our scrutiny and while we were considering our proposal, the Criminal Justice Committee was unaware of the ministerial control framework, which I do not think has yet been mentioned today. It would have been helpful to understand that framework when we were scrutinising the case for having a new commissioner. In short, we wanted to see clear evidence of the existence of a commissioner noticeably improving the experiences of victims and witnesses, which is why we requested a review.

The Scottish Biometrics Commissioner promotes the ethical and lawful use of biometric data in policing and criminal justice in Scotland, and the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner investigates incidents involving public bodies in Scotland. I pay tribute to the work of both offices, which undertake highly specialist but different functions in the justice space. In relation to the recommendation that a two-tier approach be adopted to the establishment of new commissioners, I have no doubt whatsoever that both those offices would pass the test, so to speak. I welcome that recommendation, and I note the committee's view that standardising functions would risk constraining the flexibility that commissioners need.

Turning to the issue of governance, which was an area of particular focus in the review, I think that we are all agreed that there is significant room for—and, indeed, a need for—far more proactive scrutiny. I acknowledge and agree with the view expressed by the Biometrics Commissioner, Dr Brian Plastow, when he told the review committee—in the words of the report—that

“it would be unrealistic to expect committees to respond to every report laid before Parliament.”

He suggested that a structured approach, whereby each relevant committee would hold a dedicated session once a year, for example, might strike a more manageable balance.

I agree with the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee's findings and recommendations regarding the wider public bodies. In the case of the justice sector, there might be scope to extend the Criminal Justice Committee's scrutiny to other bodies, such as the inspectorates of prisons, policing and prosecution.

Finally, I agree with the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee's recommendation that

“a new governance structure be introduced on a time-limited basis”

in the next parliamentary session.

I thank my colleague Ben Macpherson for leading the committee's important review, and I look forward to following it in delivering positive change across our supported bodies landscape.

16:32

**Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I will start with an observation as a member of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee. Although small in number, albeit overinflated in title and big in scope, I strongly believe that it proved to be more effective than many parliamentary committees with over twice its size of membership. I also record that the model of

short, sharp, time-limited committees, in my view, is effective and is a model that is worth returning to.

I described the committee's purpose as being big in scope because this is not simply about whether there are shared back-office services between commissioners or how extensive the audit arrangements for them are. Neither should the debate today be reduced to considering how many commissioners and commissions there are, or should be in the future. This committee report raises wider questions about how our democracy works, including, I have to say, how do we avoid an overconcentration of power in the hands of the executive, how do we prevent a marginalisation of Parliament as the people's guardian, and how do we stop an erosion of civil liberties and citizens' rights? So, it is about perpetually upholding confidence and constantly rebuilding the people's trust in the political process, making sure that those who govern are accountable to those who are governed. That is therefore about not just how we defend the fabric, the resilience and the integrity of our democracy but how we defend democracy itself.

I do not say this lightly, neither do I say it merely to address the fleeting challenges of the present or the world as we have come to know it, but to safeguard democratic rights in the future, because, make no mistake, there are those on the right of politics—not just those in power across the Atlantic, but some seeking power here—who, if ever given the chance, would seek to hollow our democracy out; would seek to close debate and challenge down; would seek to impose a form of authoritarianism in place of democracy. So, those institutions that we speak of in this debate today, I warn, in the future, we democrats will have to defend.

Some of the evidence that the committee took, I confess, took me a little bit by surprise. For example, the Scottish Information Commissioner told us that he was, in his own words, facing

“a never-ending cycle of constant audit”.—[*Official Report, SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee*, 20 February 2025; c 16.],

and he spoke of the

“disproportionality of the governance model”.

In my view, he failed to recognise that these are about assurance and accountability, and failed to recognise that, in the end, he, other commissioners and the bodies that the committee reviewed are spending public money. I am bound to refer him, and any elected members of this Parliament who also think that we are overaudited, to the recent case of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland.

I was also a little bit surprised by some of the remarks of the minister, who told us, I thought rather dismissively, that

“A commissioner is one voice among several”—[*Official Report, SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee*, 8 May 2025; c 10.],

although this is a Minister for Public Finance who told Parliament just last week that he did not think it was a matter for him that the GFG Alliance has not submitted audited accounts for years and was the subject of a Serious Fraud Office investigation.

**Ivan McKee:** Just to be clear, my point was that, as the Government, we would not comment on a Serious Fraud Office investigation that was under way.

**Richard Leonard:** I think that you said that company law was reserved and that, therefore, you were not prepared to comment on the lodging or not of audited accounts. Anyway, that is on the record.

Can I be even-handed, though? We also spoke to the now-departed Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, who, I have to say, to my bewilderment, told me that she would not want “true enforcement powers”, just at the very point that the Labour Government was openly defying the recommendations of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman at Westminster on the award of compensation to the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—after it found the Department for Work and Pensions guilty of maladministration. I am not, here, making a narrow party political point. These are matters that go to the very heart of what we are debating, where powers rest and whether powers of enforcement exist.

It is important to underline that the committee believes that we should consider empowering the Scottish Human Rights Commission with powers of litigation, giving new scope for more strategic powers to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and widening and deepening the powers of the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland.

It was a privilege to serve on this committee. I hope that our findings do make a difference—that they will not gather dust but contribute to the battle for effective scrutiny and accountability, and the battle for the very soul of democracy itself.

16:37

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** I come to the debate from a specific perspective, having held many roles in the Parliament—from back bencher to chief whip to Minister for Parliamentary Business and then back to back bencher again. I have been on nearly every committee in the

Parliament at some point during my time here. In fact, my role has been such that Martin Whitfield has been trying to get me on a free transfer to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for some time, so that he can make use of the particular set of skills that I seem to have.

Today’s debate gives us a chance to take a serious look at Scotland’s commissioner landscape and to ask whether we are getting the best value for the people we represent and the representation that they need. The committee has completed some good work on the issue and has given us a chance to look at the best way forward.

During my time as a minister, I worked with two Information Commissioners. Although they were very different people, they were both very good to work with and at doing the work, so none of what I am about to say has anything to do with any of the commissioners or the work that they do—it is more about how we can do this work better.

The SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee is clear when it says that we need stronger criteria for creating new commissioners. We cannot continue to add another commissioner every time there is a flashpoint or a challenging situation. Paragraph 142 of the committee’s report calls for a mapping of all our public bodies, which is happening through our public service reform strategy. It should show us where functions overlap and where we can streamline them.

We need coherence rather than clutter, which is what I want to talk about. Let us look at our Nordic neighbours such as Finland, Denmark and Norway. As I think has been mentioned already, they do not scatter powers across a dozen wee offices all over the country—they have ombudsmen with big, broad remits. In Finland, the parliamentary ombudsman covers complaints, detention, monitoring and even human rights oversight. In New Zealand, the ombudsman handles freedom of information requests as well as maladministration. Those countries all have fewer institutions with bigger remits, which offers clarity for citizens. Does that type of model cost less? Not always, but it can deliver economies of scale and avoid duplication. It also gives those institutions the status to truly take on Government and public services effectively.

We have to create the most effective and coherent system that we possibly can. The committee’s report, at paragraph 165, points to making better use of the public sector estate. Again, I highlight that we have half a dozen wee offices, when we could have one larger, more efficient office.

I will go over it again: Finland has one big parliamentary ombudsman, which covers so much; the New Zealand ombudsman's role is the equivalent of three Scottish commissioners. We could go even further and consider the idea of having an office of commissioners, all under one roof, with shared administrative and back-of-house support. That would provide efficiencies through shared use of administrative functions, and a united office could ensure common standards and reports and a joint strategic focus.

With regard to how such an office would be structured, we could discuss that another day, because I do not think that I have the time to discuss it today. Perhaps we could look at a chief commissioner, with other commissioners reporting to them. I will leave it at that for today.

It is important that we look at the different ideas out there. Some of the Nordic countries have a similar population to that of Scotland, but at the same time they have many fewer commissioners. What are they doing right that we are not currently doing, and what are they delivering for their citizens that we are not delivering in Scotland? Their arrangements cut down on the confusion that many people feel about who they would actually report something to.

The message is clear: Scotland needs commissioners, but it does not need more clutter. We need a system that is leaner, clearer and stronger. I, for one, am happy to work and talk with anyone who wants to look at doing such work, because that is what will make the difference as we take the recommendations forward.

16:42

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleton) (Ind):** That was certainly one of George Adam's better speeches—and he did not mention Paisley once, as far as I could tell.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. I am a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which looked at the topic previously, and I have read the review committee's recent report with interest.

Broadly speaking, I am supportive of what the review committee recommends, although I feel that it could have been a bit more radical. It is not that commissioners are a bad thing, but Scotland is a small country with—as we have just heard—a very cluttered public-body landscape, and we should be able to do things in a much simpler way in comparison with other, larger countries. That is why I have high hopes for Ivan McKee's work on public sector reform. I hope that he will be cutting down on the number of public bodies in a major way.

While financial savings from having fewer commissioners will not exactly transform the NHS, restricting the numbers of SPCB-supported bodies sends out an important signal that we need a simpler landscape. For every commissioner that we agree to establish, we divert resources away from front-line services. As the Finance and Public Administration Committee found, and as has now been confirmed, setting up a new commissioner was fast becoming a way for both Government and individual MSPs to try to show that they were tackling a problem. Very often, however, the underlying problem is actually a lack of money and resources, and having a commissioner does not really solve that problem. What it might do is push one group further up the queue, and push other groups further down, and I fear that that does not take us any further forward overall.

Turning to the committee's report, I very much welcome the proposal for both justification and effectiveness tests, specifically the idea of a commissioner being a "last resort" and the recommendation that there must be a clear "functional gap" before we set up a new commissioner. I have to say that I am less convinced on the point of independence, as I think that we can have independence without separate legal bodies. We have examples such as His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland, which are not set up as distinct legal organisations, but which are, I think, respected as independent.

I very much welcome the report and I will vote for the motion tonight. Personally, I would have stopped all new commissioners, including the new Patient Safety Commissioner, and the new role of victims and witnesses commissioner, which—as is somewhat ironic—we agreed to only yesterday. However, I accept that the overall mood is that we had already made a commitment on those commissioners and that the Parliament wants to go ahead with them.

It was interesting to read the comments of the ombudsman that if the SPSO had been given slighter wider powers, the Patient Safety Commissioner would not have been needed. I still think that there are strong arguments for merging the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life with the Standards Commission for Scotland. If one of the tests is for the public to understand the roles of the different commissioners, this is one case in which I do not think that the public understands—and, frankly, I do not think that I do either.

Concerning the Scottish Human Rights Commission, I had a lot of sympathy for the idea that we heard in the Finance and Public Administration Committee of having rapporteurs in

the SHRC. Maybe that is similar to what George Adam was talking about just now. I note that the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee rejected that idea.

The review committee's suggestion for the SHRC to have a different emphasis each year, following the example of the Auditor General, is potentially a good one. The SHRC's own briefing for this debate confirms that it is open to having its powers and remit reviewed. On the other hand, I am less convinced about the need for a specialist committee to scrutinise all SPCB-supported bodies, even though that is planned as a pilot. There is a danger of duplication in that idea: individual committees should be carrying out that scrutiny role, and I know that some already are. For example, the Children and Young People's Commissioner stresses in its briefing the importance of its regular interaction with the Education, Children and Young People Committee—so that commissioner might potentially be dealing with three committees.

The SHRC commented that its committee did hold it to account, but that it did not deal with finance and budget scrutiny. I am sorry, but subject committees need to do more on finance and not leave all of that to the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

Overall, I am happy to support the review committee's motion. The committee could have gone a bit further and been a bit more radical. However, at least we are putting down a clear marker that the drift to having more and more commissioners must be stopped. I welcome that.

16:46

**Lorna Slater:** There is value in highlighting some other points that arose in the evidence taken by the committee. One was about the connection between the Parliament and the existing SPCB-supported bodies—and, indeed, between the Parliament and public bodies in general. There are improvements to be made in both how well parliamentary committees hold those bodies to account and how effectively the work of those bodies is fed into the Parliament and the Government. In many cases, commissioners and the other bodies are doing excellent work, such as conducting research or producing reports, but it is not necessarily being taken up by, or feeding into, Government policy or priorities.

That might be exacerbated when bodies work on matters that do not align with the legislation and policies on which the Government is currently focusing. For example, if reports are not immediately relevant to the work of the Government, they might languish on a shelf. Some alignment of what commissioners and public

bodies are doing within the current Government programme might be beneficial.

The issue appears to be partly due to the lack of an effective mechanism to feed that work into the Parliament. Parliamentary committees choose the work that they will undertake. If they choose not to delve into the detail of the work of SPCB-supported bodies, commissioners or other public bodies, such work might be ignored. That is why I support the formation of a committee specifically to bring the work of SPCB-supported bodies into the Parliament. The Public Audit Committee provides an example: the work of Audit Scotland is considered weekly and the committee can bring issues that are raised to the attention of the Parliament, the Government and the subject committees.

There is a point to be made about ensuring that subject committees are clear about their role in scrutinising the work of public bodies. They can choose to prioritise doing that. They can also choose to use the influence of, and investigations done by, those bodies to influence the Government and hold it to account. They can be the link.

I was concerned to hear that the creation of each new advocacy-type commissioner reduces the remit of the Scottish Human Rights Commission. It seems to me that that is the wrong direction of travel. Expanding the remit and resources of the Scottish Human Rights Commission—possibly, as Maggie Chapman suggested, with the addition of focused, time-limited projects—might provide a better solution than a proliferation of new commissioners might.

The committee made an interesting finding about the independence of public bodies. It was emphasised to us how important it was for the SPCB-supported bodies to be independent of the Government—something that we can all agree on. However, we also heard from, and about, other bodies in the wider public sector landscape that act independently of the Government, such as the Scottish Fiscal Commission, Audit Scotland and the Scottish Legal Complaints Commission.

In short, it is not necessary for commissioners to be supported by the SPCB for them to be independent of Government or for them to work in the space of supporting public trust. I could certainly discern no pattern with respect to which public bodies should be SPCB-supported ones and which should be ordinary public bodies.

I am sure that everyone in the chamber would like to prevent failure in our public services delivery and to quickly and effectively address failures when they occur. We all want to ensure that public services are effective for everyone, but a proliferation of commissioners is not an effective

mechanism for achieving that. Instead, we need to reconsider the remits of our existing public bodies—including, as George Adam said, the possible consolidation of such bodies—filling any gaps between them to ensure full coverage of public trust mechanisms and service delivery oversight; ensuring clarity of responsibility; and putting in place systems to prevent delivery failures rather than just reacting to them.

The evidence pointed clearly to our role as parliamentarians. It is our job to raise issues with ministers. It is our job on committees to follow what public bodies are doing and to feed their work into the Parliament and the Government. We cannot outsource that work—it is our role. There is something for each of us to consider about how we can be most effective, too.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Martin Whitfield to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour.

15:39

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. As others have done, I start by thanking the convener of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, its members and those who supported it, along with the commissioners who contributed so much to its work. At the outset, I want to say that I support the recommendations in the report, which is a timely and necessary intervention in a system that has basically grown without a strategy, coherence or sufficient scrutiny, as we have heard this afternoon.

The report rightly identifies that Scotland's commissioner landscape has evolved in an ad hoc manner. We have a patchwork of bodies, some of which are statutory regulators, some of which are advocacy focused, and some of which are attempting to do both roles. That lack of clarity has led to duplication, inefficiency and confusion, and that confusion exists not just in the Parliament but among the public, whom we serve.

Let me also be clear that commissioners are essential to our democracy. However, we need to understand their roles: there are statutory commissioners, such as the Scottish Information Commissioner and the Ethical Standards Commissioner, who are regulators, enforcers of laws, upholders of standards and insurers of compliance; advocacy commissioners, who amplify the voices of the underrepresented or unrepresented and promote systemic change; and there are those who straddle both roles, who are expected to advocate, investigate and, in some cases, regulate, often without the resources or the clarity to do so effectively.

There have been some fascinating contributions to the debate. I want to start with George Adam, simply because of his invitation to me to continue to petition for his transfer to my committee, which would therefore mean its expansion. The comment that he rightly made about coherence over clutter is massively important, as is having the status to take on the Government. As a number of contributors have pointed out—this was most clearly expressed by Lorna Slater—we create commissioners that the Scottish Government will not listen to. That is the challenge, but is it the fault of the commissioner, of cross-party groups, of committees or of individuals out there if the Scottish Government chooses not to listen?

**Lorna Slater:** The member raises a good point. We have a frustration—we can use the example of climate matters, which Sarah Boyack also raised—that creating a new commissioner just gives the Government another group to ignore. A commissioner does not necessarily have more clout or more effectiveness, and there are other bodies—international bodies as well as third sector organisations—that have the ability to do research. It is not the case that a commissioner will make the Government suddenly jump into action. Therefore, the better question is how, for example, parliamentary committees can be more effective in influencing the Government.

**Martin Whitfield:** Yes, absolutely, and I welcome that intervention, because this issue sits in a complex network, or jigsaw, work on which is on-going and will come to the chamber before the end of the parliamentary session.

I want to deal with the question of the amendment in my name, which has so upset colleagues across the chamber. I apologise for that upset, but I will pick out the reason for the amendment. I will also ensure that I allow time for the SPCB representative to respond, given what Maggie Chapman said about the disadvantage of losing a direct, specific order from Parliament.

The motion opens by pointing out, rightly, the challenge for parliamentary committee resources, yet the specifics draw attention to the creation of an additional committee. I understand and agree with the proposal to temporarily give one committee the responsibility for all commissioners. However, we will then have to explore where, given their statutory functions, some of the commissioners will report to. Is the Ethical Standards Commissioner working satisfactorily if X number of complaints are processed? Will the committee want to look at those?

We sit within both primary legislation and standing orders with regard to how this is dealt with. It is a complex question, which is why I raised with Maggie Chapman the issue of the SPCB giving evidence to a parliamentary

committee. There is a challenge in that role that needs to be considered carefully.

**Maggie Chapman:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Martin Whitfield:** I am conscious of time, Deputy Presiding Officer—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The intervention will need to be brief, because Mr Whitfield will thereafter be concluding.

**Maggie Chapman:** I wonder whether Martin Whitfield will acknowledge that, if a committee required to take evidence, it would be possible for it to do so in camera so that some of the frank conversations that already exist between commissioners and the corporate body, which meets in camera, could still happen.

**Martin Whitfield:** Given the shortage of time, I will conclude, but I am more than happy to discuss that. I am challenged by the idea that we are going to hide this behind a camera being off.

The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Derek Walker, has said:

“being the guardian of the interests of people not yet born is the greatest privilege.”

One of the roles that commissioners have taken is giving a voice to people who do not have a voice in this place.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Stephen Kerr to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:57

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** This has been a very useful debate and many of the speeches have been very thoughtful. Members have clearly thought through the implications of the committee’s excellent report, and their thoughts and conclusions have been much appreciated by me. It is difficult to sum up in a few minutes everything that members have said, but I congratulate Ben Macpherson and his committee on producing such a fine report.

Ben Macpherson struck a number of significant notes in his opening comments, specifically on the importance of a strategic mapping exercise in relation to the particular bodies—a point that was immediately taken up by the minister. However, there is also a wider exercise to be done on public sector bodies, and I know that the Minister for Public Finance is across that.

It is also significant that Ben Macpherson talked about parliamentary capacity. We have debated that subject on a Thursday afternoon before, but I do not feel that we are making much progress on tackling it. We need to consider the scale of the

scrutiny work that falls on this Parliament. We have 129 members but, including the bodies that we have discussed this afternoon, there are 131 public bodies. That is more than one body per MSP. That shows the scale of the task of proper scrutiny. We have a sprawling network of commissions, commissioners, ombudsmen and all the different public bodies.

I have a great quote from Ivan McKee, which he knows I will use on every occasion that I can. He said:

“Nobody knows everything about all the 130-odd public bodies and what they are all doing”.—[*Official Report, SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee*, 8 May 2025; c 12.]

To me, that says it all. It sums up where we are and puts it in context. If the minister feels that way, every other member in this Parliament should feel the same way, and we should resolve—on the basis of the very good thought that we have heard this afternoon—to actually do something about it.

However, will we do that, or will we simply say that the report and this debate will form part of a legacy from the current session of Parliament that whoever is sitting here in a few months’ time will have to pick up and do something with? I know that we have a lot on our plates, but that would be an abrogation of responsibility. In the time that we have left, we should do something about this. Kenny Gibson highlighted that and so did Murdo Fraser.

When we take off our party hats and rosette colours and begin to talk to each other about how we can make our country better, improve its governance and improve the Parliament and the processes that we use, it is incredible to discover that, regardless of the party that we are in, we end up largely agreeing with each other. There is a lesson in that. The public do not see it, but when we set aside the biggest issues that divide us, we find a huge element of common ground.

It astonishes me to reflect that one of the two best speeches that have been given today was given by Lorna Slater. That is probably going to result in two things. The first is that I will be excommunicated from the Conservative and Unionist Party, and the other is that Lorna’s status in the Green Party—which is already somewhat shaky—might be shakier. [*Interruption.*] I am being extremely nice to the member, and I am sorry that she does not feel that I am.

I thought that her speech, along with Kenny Gibson’s, hit the nail on the head about quality and quantity of work, the need for deadlines and the need for a clear process. I 100 per cent endorse all the things that Kenny Gibson said about that. I wish that that would become the culture of our Parliament. Lorna Slater said that what we need is

not all these different bodies, different places to go and signposts to different people; what we need is a Parliament that does its job. In fact, if the Parliament were to begin to exercise its parliamentary muscles and properly scrutinise the executive and hold it to account, the good news for the executive is that it would improve, and by the measurement of many of us in the chamber, it needs to improve.

The consequence of the performance of any Government is partly related to the ability of the Parliament that it accounts to to do its job. On that measurement, we do not do a particularly good job. That is what we keep coming back to. Lorna Slater quoted the New Zealand witness who came before the committee's inquiry, and we should sit up and take note of what they said. We need a Parliament that does its job. I am quickly running out of time, but I recognise that a number of people have said some really good things.

I will now focus on what Richard Leonard, my old sparring partner from decades ago at the University of Stirling, said. He reflected on the fact that when we get together in small committees—and “small committees” needs to be underlined and capitalised—and we have short, sharp, time-limited inquiries, we get really good work. I hope that the lesson that he shared is not lost on any of us, because it is very important.

When Richard Leonard talked about the need for accountability, I said “Hear, hear!” and, “Amen!”. He quoted the famous water example, but I will use the example of the Glasgow City Council officials who awarded themselves huge pay-offs. To whom do they account, at the end of the day? Our system is lacking in democratic accountability. What he said in his characteristic fashion is absolutely correct.

I know that I am running out of time. John Mason said that George Adam gave one of his best speeches without mentioning Paisley, but I actually think that John Mason gave one of his best speeches. I agree with him that we do not need more bodies; we need fewer. We also need better processes for accountability and a change of culture in our public services generally, regardless of which body we are looking at.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Kerr, could you please bring your remarks to a close?

**Stephen Kerr:** We need a zero-defects approach, so that we can improve what we do in the name of the people of Scotland and for the people of Scotland.

17:04

**Ivan McKee:** I have to say that it has turned out to be a very interesting debate and there has been

a huge amount of agreement across the chamber. The only disagreement has been on the Labour amendment, which, for the record, we will not support.

We have heard Sue Webber make common cause with Lorna Slater, and Stephen Kerr with Richard Leonard—it has been quite a remarkable afternoon. I commend Ben Macpherson and Murdo Fraser for setting out very well the issues that the committee addressed. Murdo Fraser was right to make the point that there is limitless potential for the creation of new commissioners, should we choose to create them. It is important that that issue was addressed.

Lorna Slater made the point that the creation of commissioners is often seen as a response to perceived failings in public services. As a Government minister, I would argue that services are good and improving. Not everyone will share that view, but the key point is that, whatever one's view of public services, the answer is not to make the system more complicated. That just makes services worse, not better. It diverts resource and attention—a point that was made well by Kenny Gibson.

I reflect on a point that Lorna Slater made in her intervention. Just for the record, the Government does not ignore anyone; we listen to all voices and respond appropriately.

In fairness, the point that Stephen Kerr referred to about no one knowing what every public body is doing relates to their detailed work plans. Not everyone knows what every public body is doing at a detailed level. That reflects the complexity of the system that we have in front of us and the number of challenges that the report seeks to address. We are continuing to review the overlaps and duplication, which we will address through a mapping exercise, as part of the simplification process. I will talk more in a minute about the broader PSR strategy.

In response to Stephen Kerr's other point, he should consider the committee's excellent report in the broader context of the PSR strategy. I am sure that he has read from cover to cover all 18 workstreams and is across that, because that is the vehicle that will take forward activity across a broad front. There will be engagement with not just Government and public bodies but those throughout the public and third sectors, and other voices, to ensure that we deliver on our aspiration to build a more effective public service delivery mechanism.

**Stephen Kerr:** Does the minister agree that, in respect to culture change, there should be a line in every annual budget for every cost centre in Government that demonstrates measurable productivity savings?

**Ivan McKee:** As the member knows, we are working to take forward productivity improvements. Mr Kerr will know that workstream 1 in the PSR strategy addresses culture. We absolutely understand the importance of the culture point, which we tie closely to how we recruit, promote, assess and hold accountable leaders across the public sector. The work that we are doing on preventative budgets in workstream 6 is also really important in ensuring that we are clear that we are getting value from every public pound that we spend.

Richard Leonard's comments were interesting. He further broadened the scope and importance of what we are trying to do. Judging by his comments, we do not see eye to eye on everything, but I take on board his point about holding the executive to account. That is critical in our democracy. As Stephen Kerr said, that makes the job of the executive easier to an extent, because such a constructive challenge helps enable us to take forward the important work that we do on behalf of the people who send us here.

It is worth reflecting on Richard Leonard's comments about how getting this right is important for our democracy more broadly. I turn to the work that the Government is doing in that regard. We all recognise that, as John Mason said, we are talking about £18 million and a handful of commissioners, but the signal that it sends and the approach and culture change that it signifies are important. The public service reform agenda is about shifting those resources to the front line and, in doing so, making a significant difference to the lives of the people of Scotland and positively impacting service delivery. It is about further integration of services, and shifting resources to prevention, which we believe can make billions of pounds-worth of impact on public services.

We have been talking about not increasing the number of commissioners and public bodies. Stephen Kerr and John Mason made the point that the direction of travel is to reduce, not increase, the number of public bodies. We do not want to end up in a situation where the only show in town is restructuring, because that in itself can be diversionary. We will take the work forward through the removal of duplication and the integration of shared services. We are clear, and the strategy is clear that, where necessary, structural change will be implemented appropriately to reduce the number of public bodies and ensure that the services that we deliver on behalf of the people of Scotland are as integrated, effective and efficient as possible.

Thank you, Presiding Officer. [*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, minister. The sound of the division bell was unexpected. It had an immediate impact on the

minister, though, so that is something to bear in mind in future.

I call Ben Macpherson, on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, to wind up the debate. If you could take us to 5.20 pm, that would be great.

17:10

**Ben Macpherson:** I am pleased to close the debate, which I think has been excellent. It has shown our Parliament at its best in terms of constructive dialogue, different reflections and putting forward perspectives on the concerns that we share.

In closing on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate for their reflections and for their time. I also thank my fellow members of our small but effective committee, which delivered the report for the Parliament and was brilliantly supported by our clerks and the research team at SPICe.

We have heard a range of reflections in the debate, many of which have touched on themes and challenges that our committee grappled with over the course of our six-month review. I will pick up on a number of those points now.

It was helpful of Maggie Chapman and Kenny Gibson to set the perspectives of the SPCB and the Finance and Public Administration Committee on the research that had been done prior to our committee's work being instructed, on the SPCB's wider challenges and procedures in relation to engaging with the bodies and on how the report can assist the SPCB if it is agreed by Parliament.

I am also grateful to the minister for setting out the Government's perspective and touching more widely on public sector reform. One of the challenges that we faced as a committee was in considering the SPCB-supported bodies as part of a much wider landscape of public sector bodies and the need for reform across the board. It is helpful that the Government has engaged so constructively with our committee's recommendations.

As Clare Haughey rightly emphasised, we need to get to a position of greater simplicity and accessibility. As George Adam emphasised, we need to move to a more streamlined situation with greater coherence. As John Mason emphasised, there is potential for amalgamation and a reduction in the number of public bodies. It will be interesting and important to see how the Government takes forward its agenda, and I know that Parliament will look at that in great detail and with great attention.

Martin Whitfield was right to emphasise that committees' reporting, which was already substantial, has been enhanced as of yesterday. We heard from Sue Webber and Audrey Nicoll, in their previous and current convener capacities, how difficult it is for some committees, particularly the larger ones, given the amount of legislation that they have to contend with, to scrutinise our public bodies regularly and effectively. That is why the committee recommended creating a dedicated committee to look specifically at those issues.

**Martin Whitfield:** Although I absolutely agree that that is worth trying, did the committee consider—I fear that this may come up in the future—that an independent committee would lack the specialism of, for example, the Education, Children and Young People Committee to deal with the specialist commissioners who would appear in front of it?

**Ben Macpherson:** At no point did our committee recommend or decide that the specific committee would be the only committee that would hold the bodies to account. It would provide additional accountability and drive proactivity and performance. Public sector delivery improvement is the aspiration of our recommendations.

I thought that Lorna Slater's and Richard Leonard's speeches were both outstanding—I am not saying that just because they were my committee colleagues—and were symbolic of the contributions that they made in the committee. They touched on two points related to the fact that, as I outlined in opening the debate, the committee's report recommended targeted improvements across the board as well as specific improvements to how the SPCB-supported bodies landscape and, indeed, the wider public sector could operate. Those improvements could involve changes to existing bodies.

As Richard Leonard touched on, the committee recommended enhancing the powers of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, based on the evidence that we received, and that the SPSO be granted enhanced powers to carry out own-initiative investigations in the public interest. That would enable the ombudsman to identify and report on systematic failures in public services before complaints arise. It would be a preventative measure that we believe would deliver better outcomes for service users and provide greater value for public money in the long run. The committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to engage with the SPCB on that recommendation.

As Lorna Slater touched on, we also considered how the Scottish Human Rights Commission could be developed to provide a more effective, rights-based approach to addressing structural inequalities in Scotland. Although we were not

convinced that expanding the functions of the SHRC to include specialist departments, rapporteurs or sub-commissioners to protect specific groups in society would achieve the best outcomes, we believe that there is a case for a wider review of the SHRC's remit and powers. Once again, the committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to hold further discussions with the SPCB and the SHRC on the matter. We also welcome the engagement that we have had with the SHRC.

The committee believes that SPCB-supported bodies could do more to adopt a proactive and preventative approach. Our recommendations encourage all SPCB-supported bodies to put in place measures that would allow them to address systematic issues at an early stage. That shift towards a more proactive and preventative approach not only would enhance the effectiveness of those bodies but would help to avoid issues such as complaints or service delivery failures arising in the first place.

Of course, there will be consideration of SPCB-supported bodies in future meetings of the Parliament. It may be worth considering that the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland naturally thinks about future generations, and perhaps some thought could be given to whether its remit could be reconsidered in the future. That is a just point of constructive engagement with Sarah Boyack.

The committee recognises the progress that has been made on shared services, but more could be done. We recommend moving towards a formal hub-and-spoke model, which would centralise key support functions such as human resources, finance and information technology while ensuring that the statutory independence of each office-holder is protected. In addition, we encourage greater and more flexible use of the wider public sector estate as existing leases come to an end, striking the right balance between efficiency and independence. We encourage the Scottish Government and the SPCB to work together to achieve that.

It has been a good, constructive debate, and the review has been an opportunity to look at the bigger picture of how we create, support and scrutinise the SPCB-supported bodies, which play a vital role in safeguarding public trust, institutional integrity and democratic accountability. Our recommendations are designed to future proof the landscape, ensuring that it is strategic, sustainable and fit for the years ahead. We call on all members to support the committee's motion at decision time.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** That concludes the debate on motion S6M-18936, on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies

Landscape Review Committee, on the SPCB-supported bodies landscape review.

## Decision Time

17:19

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-18936.1, in the name of Martin Whitfield, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18936, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, on the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body-supported bodies landscape review, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:20

*Meeting suspended.*

17:22

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** We move to the vote on amendment S6M-18936.1, in the name of Martin Whitfield. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect. I would have voted no.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Brown. We will ensure that that is recorded.

### For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

**Against**

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

**Abstentions**

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-18936.1, in the name of Martin Whitfield, is: For 22, Against 81, Abstentions 1.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-18936, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, on the SPCB-supported bodies landscape review, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

**For**

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and  
 Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)  
 (Con)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast  
 by Ross Greer]  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)  
 (SNP)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by  
 Michael Marra]  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)

(SNP)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

### Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

### Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast  
 by Willie Rennie]

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on motion S6M-18936, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on behalf of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee, on the SPCB-supported bodies landscape review, is: For 101, Against 1, Abstentions 3.

### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament welcomes and notes the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee's 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review* (SP Paper 828); recognises the Committee's conclusions and recommendations, including concerns that expanding the number of SPCB supported bodies risks further fragmenting the current landscape, increasing complexity for service users, and placing additional strain on the SPCB and parliamentary committee resources, and agrees with the Committee's recommendations that:

(a) the SPCB supported body landscape should not be expanded to include new advocacy-type SPCB supported bodies;

(b) any future proposals for new SPCB supported bodies must satisfy two-tier criteria, as set out in paragraph 150 of the report, comprising both justification and effectiveness tests, and that a parliamentary committee should be given the remit of assessing proposals against these criteria; and

(c) a parliamentary committee should be given the specific responsibility for the accountability and scrutiny of SPCB supported bodies for a fixed period as a pilot exercise in Session 7.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

*Meeting closed at 17:27.*



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